10 OUTSTANDING STORIES

ARGOSY

JULY, 1959

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THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

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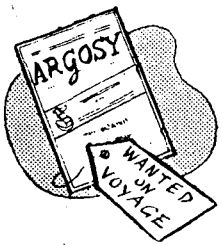

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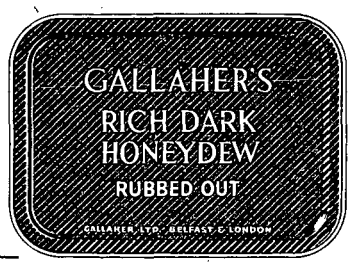

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ARGOSY

A Fleetway magazine

Vol. XX **CONTENTS FOR JULY, 1959** **No. 7**

		Page
Log Book		4
	Illustrations by Graham	
Bees to Honey	**Michael Forrestier**	7
Out for a Sail Out		20
The Mole	**Nicholas Dee**	21
Summer's Lease (Science Fiction Choice)	**John Christopher**	31
Flowres of Love		42
	Decorations by Ian Garrard	
	The translation by Helen Waddell, from "Mediaeval Latin Lyrics," by courtesy of Constable and Company; "Gardenia," by permission of Michael Joseph; "Crab Apple," by courtesy of William Heinemann and Phoenix House; "Carpet of Flowers," by permission of Secker and Warburg	
Dear Decoy	**Nicholas Monsarrat**	45
The Terrible Mrs. Barker	**Michael Gilbert**	56
	© *Mrs. Michael Gilbert 1959*	
	Illustration by Ian Garrard	
All I Ask	**Ken Hardman**	70
	"Dripping Affection," by Ogden Nash, by permission, Copyright, 1957, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.	
Back of Beyond	**Ray Bradbury**	75
	From "The Day It Rained Forever," published by Rupert Hart-Davis	
The Tallest Man in the World	**Janet Green**	83
	© *Janet Green 1956*	
	"L-Ement of Risk," by courtesy of George Allen and Unwin	
Desert Breed	**George Rackham**	105
Ghost in the Machine		108
	Decorations by Karin Williger	
	The poem by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson by permission of Macmillan and Company; "That's the Drill," by courtesy of The Times Publishing Company; "Simple Mechanism," by permission of Miss D. E. Collins and Methuen and Company	
Run of the Deer	**Robert Blake**	110
	Illustration by Walter Langhammer	
Argosy Crossword		144

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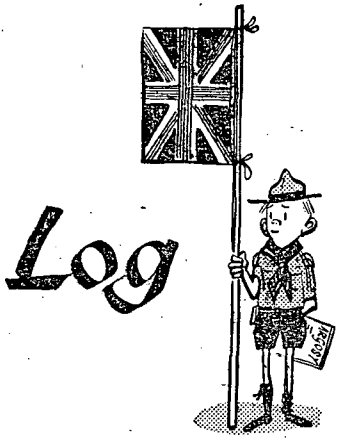

Log Book

THUMBING through a recent report on market research methods in Europe, we came on a useful glossary of terms in English, French, and German. To the lay eye, of course, the terms themselves, even in English, were not entirely comprehensible, but in several cases the foreign translations threw a flood of light.

For instance, although we were not sure of the exact definition of a Random Sampling Error, there could be no doubt about a Stichprobenfehler zufallsfehler—it must be one of those scenes of chaos after a whole lot of soot has fallen down the chimney.

A Standard Error, what might be called the Boy Scout's first mistake, becomes an Erreur Type, when translated into French, obviously a kind of teddy boy, while in German he turns into a Standardfehler, a most respectable fellow, in fact the Average Man.

Prestige Bias (the French call it Effet de Prestige, the sort of impression created by General de Gaulle) becomes in German von Prestigerück sichten beeinflusste/falsche Antwort, which suggests the state of mind of a well-known person caught smuggling dutiable goods past the Customs.

Aided Recall (this might be one of those heavy sessions with a spiritual guide in a revivalist group) turns in German to Erinnerungstest mit gedächtnisstutze, which sounds suspiciously like an invitation to play Ring o' Roses with a decked-up tootsie.

The German for Continuity is the useful expression Zusammenhang—" Oh," you say falsely when being taught a new card game, " I've more or less got the Zusammenhang of it now."

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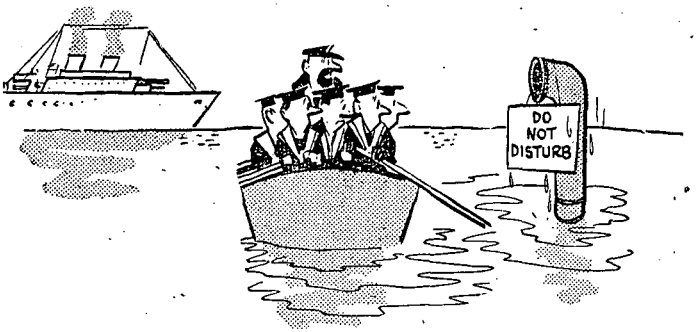


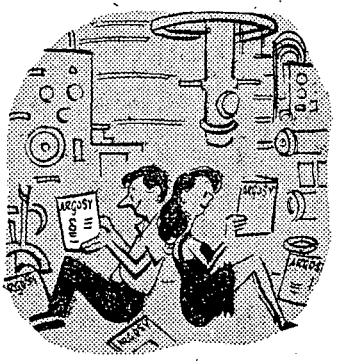
The glossary also created some invaluable words for the writers of spy-fiction, as under . . .

The hero, James Bodkin, and his French girlfriend, Piège, (the Germans call her Fangfrage) are being questioned by the infamous Herr Doktor Nein as to their knowledge of naval dispositions in the submarine arctic. He has grilled them on barbecues, dropped them into tanks full of corydoras punctatus, and administered electric shocks to their eyeballs, but still there is no answer from them. (Refus de répondre, R-rate, Antwortverweigerung.)

" Einfache Schichtung," snarls Dr. Nein, " we will break this verdommte spirit somehow. Sink them in one of our submarines with a ration of one c.c. of oxygen each per day. At the end of a year we will have another Kontrollinterview."

But long before the end of the year Dr. Nein has been eaten by his own corydoras, whereas James and his Piège find a whole hoard of Argosy back numbers in the submarine's library, and are so absorbed they often forget to take up their oxygen ration. James is downright annoyed at their rescue by the British Navy, and exclaims, " Stichprobeneinheit auswahleinheit!" which, we fear, can only mean, " Stick it on the wall!"

Manifold are the uses of Market Research.



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Nicholas Monsarrat has written a whole batch of fabulously successful best-sellers, of which *The Cruel Sea* comes first to mind (it sold a million, and netted him £75,000). He was born in Liverpool and spent a formative youth sailing small craft round the coast thereabouts, joined the navy when war came and rapidly rose to Lieutenant-Commander. War over, he became head of British Information Services, first in South Africa, later in Canada. Now retired, he lives in Ottawa.

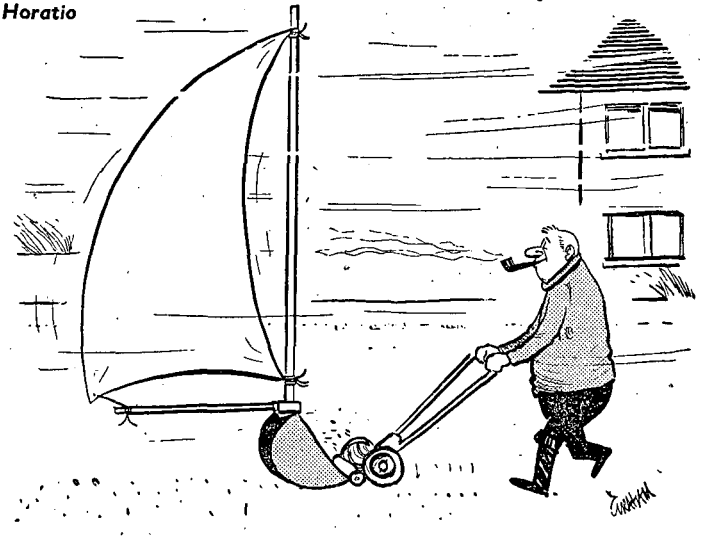
Janet Green began life as an actress, first appearing in the famous Aldwych farces. In 1945 she switched from acting to writing filmscripts and plays; for instance, *The Clouded Yellow, Matilda Shouted Fire.* She is married to stage producer and writer John McCormick.

Michael Forrestier is reserved to the point of no comment about himself, but admits to living in Mexico, where he spends most of his time painting, occasionally writing a short story. He is a nephew of E. M. Forster, the novelist.

Apart from a nocturnal production of serials and short stories—about 400 since the war—**Robert Blake** enjoys an everyday life as a journalist. Under his real name of Barry Joynson Cork he has written *Rider on a Grey Horse,* (Cassell) a biography of Hodson, the Indian cavalry leader. Lives in a London suburb with what he describes as "one wife, one daughter, a Shetland sheep-dog, a guinea pig, a mouse, and three cats."

JOHN SILVER

Horatio



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BEES TO HONEY

She was tall, in a blood-red gown,
a burst of jewels at her breast

BY MICHAEL FORRESTIER

"WHAT misadventure is so early up, that calls our person from our morning rest?" sighed Mr. Ivo Noel. He focused glassy eyes on the houseboy standing before him. "Does the Prince want to see me right away?"

"Si, senor," the houseboy said.

Ivo groaned. An army of blacksmiths was using his skull as an anvil; he wished they'd go away and take the whole world with them.

Well, perhaps not everybody. There was Prince Pavel now, whom he cherished with a warm and delighted affection. A relic of the old régime, Prince Pavel Dolgorukov in his youth had followed that fabulous pattern the Czarist princes traced across Europe with their railroad coaches and retinues, their Hungarian ballet dancers, and their glitter at Monte Carlo. He came of a fantastic breed, with a zest that the weight of his years could not dim. Yet from this early morning message Ivo guessed that the old Prince was in trouble.

He drained the last of his breakfast, pushed his untidy bulk from the table, and went like a rumpled bear, grumbling and muttering, through the masculine dimness of the Popocatepetl Yacht Club.

The club, too, Ivo reflected, was purely the Prince's creation. Its membership was more exclusive than the Almanach de Gotha, but the qualifications were somewhat different. Here you were accepted only if you met the Prince's idea of what constituted an amusing and interesting citizen; a man, in His Highness' meaning of the word.

Ivo had bowed out of Britain's Intelligence service after the excitements of the war were over. With an urge to travel, he had packed a suitcase and drifted. Halfway round the world he had discovered the club, been duly gathered in, and thereafter used it as headquarters. He treasured the old Prince as something precious and almost extinct, like a favourite uncle who happened to be a whooping crane.

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As he climbed worn patio steps Ivo flinched at the dazzle of Mexican sunlight, and thanked heaven that a club fiesta like last night's happened only once a year. At the top, he raised his hand to knock.

"My dear fellow," a thin voice called, "come in. Come gaze upon the mockery of what was once a man. Lord have mercy, I need you, Ivo. It seems that I am growing soft with age. Have you breakfasted?"

The old man indicated a plate of raw herring lying by the dishes of bonbons that were always beside him.

Ivo shuddered. "Spare me, Prince Pavel."

In the rich folds of his dressing-gown the Prince sat lean and upright in a Spanish chair, his beak of a nose like a knife under the ancient skin. His cropped, white hair stood indignantly erect.

The Prince shook his fist at a naked space on the wall in which there should have been a fabric of purple velvet spangled with golden bees. It had been there yesterday.

"You see it? It's vanished!"

"So it has." Ivo's head throbbed. "Your tapestry."

"My beehive! Stupid that I am, without the wits to guard my own. You must find it for me, Ivo, and bring it back before the bees lose their honey."

"Honey?"

"They have nourished me through all these years," the Prince quavered. "But now the comb is gone."

Age, with his stealing steps, Ivo decided, hath clawed him in his clutch. "Bees," he said. "Little bits of golden thread. Sentiment, I expect?"

"Sentiment be damned! They were my strength, those bees. They provided the last legitimate Dolgorukov with all the delicacies I need. And now some lousy peasant has liquidated them."

"Have you called the police?"

The Prince snorted. "My dear fellow, I was cured of policemen at an early age. No, you are the only one discreet and capable enough. You must find them for me. Say you will, Ivo?"

Noel stroked his aching temples, and he saw the misery in his old friend's face. He grinned wryly. "I love to hear that unicorns may be betrayed with trees—"

"Your confounded bits of Shakespeare!" the Prince interrupted. "I've often wondered, were you an actor?"

"Great heavens, no. Merely the victim of an English education. As a boy, for my crimes I had to memorise various

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passages from the Bard. Before I left school I could recite every line he wrote. It's become a habit, and I, a creature native and indued . . . Yes, well, the bees."

He ran fingers through his shaggy hair. "Do I recall something about Napoleon?"

"My bees were woven for Louis Napoleon's coronation," the Prince nodded. "They were the Bonaparte cipher. They used to decorate the throne room in the Luxembourg Palace in Paris. But after the fall of the Second Empire, and the Paris Commune—*pfaff!*"

His eloquent hands scattered the pomp and the glory.

"Some of them turned up in Russia. The Emperor bought them; and for years they hung in Gatchina, in a corridor among the banners and statues. I played games under them when I was a lad. Then once again—*pfouff!*"

He dismissed the Russian revolution and popped a bonbon into his mouth.

Ivo looked deliberately out at the distant, sun-bleached roofs of Mexico City.

The Prince chewed. "I got away with a pocketful of trinkets, and contrived to exist in a welter of evasions until one day I found—I shan't bore you with the details—this piece that had been hacked from the great tapestry. In memory of childhood games," he said, "I annexed it.

"After that we travelled, my bees and I, until we came to this accommodating land and I established this club. Now, after so many years, no honey."

Ivo poured him a snifter of brandy.

"Has anyone," he asked, "shown an outstanding interest in your—ah—honey?"

The Prince's glance stole momentarily aside. "The tapestry has always attracted collectors, connoisseurs—that sort. I've had many offers. But I am like Antoine, I love it too much to let it go."

"Antoine? Your chef?"

"Yes. Let me tell you that every morning when he enters he salutes it. But no, not what you're thinking. Antoine's been with me for years. I know all about him. Why, I even trust my stomach to him!"

"Have you told anyone else about the robbery?"

"No. Why should I?"

Sadly the Prince shook his head. "I seldom go out nowadays, but last night when I presided at our dinner I left my rooms unlocked. Why should I not trust my friends? Yet they flew away last night, my poor insects, and now they'll die."

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"How can they die?"

Ivo caught a glint in the old man's eyes as the lids drooped down. "I'm tired," the Prince sighed. "Please go. I know you'll find them and bring them back to me. Alive."

Downstairs in the clatter of the kitchen, a pudgy cook in a tall, white cap was squeezing cream over a tray of confectioneries. He saw Ivo and beamed. "Monsieur Noel! I trust last night's dinner sits well with you?"

"You surpassed yourself, Antoine. Those sterlets in wine. The steak. The mousse." He sighed in ponderous ecstasy. "Tell me, did you use honey?"

"But naturally. Monsieur has a discerning palate."

"Have you a preference for honey?"

The cook shrugged. "It has its uses."

"And bees?"

"Why the devil should I cook bees? Am I a Zulu?" Antoine's face lengthened. "Forgive me. Monsieur knows. This nonsense; what a smear on the dignity of a Prince!"

"It touches you deeply," Ivo observed.

The cook threw out his chest. "Am I not Antoine, premier officier de bouche du Prince? In the old days that was the title of the chefs of the French kings. I am a royalist, monsieur. That tapestry was to me a throne. An exile, I revered it."

"His Highness seems fond of it, too." Ivo's hand reached idly to the tray.

"Ah, no! No!" Antoine darted round the table. He picked up a knife. "Not if you value your digestion."

His round eyes twinkled. "Those are indigestible. For the hangover, better this." The knife whisked paper-thin slices from a haunch of beef.

"How right you are." Ivo munched. "Were—um—many people interested in Napoleon's drapery?"

"Some. Enough. I see that you are, yourself, monsieur."

Ivo clucked. "Am I a beekeeper? Who has been curious about it recently?"

Antoine looked vague, he spread his hands. "There was Monsieur Kairos," he said softly. "Lazar Kairos."

Ivo almost bit his tongue. Kairos, a jeweller here in Mexico City. And before that?

Memory came back to him of the early war days and the rash of shabby speculators who infested the fringes of Europe, turning disaster into money for themselves. There was a man named Kairos who had worked a nasty little racket fleecing refugees from Occupied France.

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He said, " I didn't know you knew the jeweller? "

" But certainly, monsieur. Often I supervise for him when he has one of his grand parties. I do not love that species, but one has to live."

" Indeed, yes. Any others? "

Antoine pouted.

" Kairos I remember. And why? All these bonbons are for him. A very grand party, at his home tonight."

Suddenly his stomach shook, and he began to giggle. " If you should eat them there tonight, monsieur, believe me, you would not find them too rich. On the contrary, smoothly digestible! "

" It's very rude to keep staring over my shoulder when I'm talking to you," said the red-haired young woman. She reached up, retrieved Ivo's bow-tie, and patted it into place.

The air was delicate with perfumes and tobacco. Under the blaze of chandeliers a hundred couples danced to the rhythms of a mariache band. The room was packed. There were diplomats and actors, politicians and high-ranking officers, and everywhere among them, the soft gleam of bare shoulders.

Kairos, Ivo thought, had certainly come up in the world.

" You're not listening to a word I say," the redhead complained. She followed his gaze to a gorgeous brunette who stood vivid as a flame among her admirers. The redhead sighed. " I know your trouble exactly. Let me warn you, it bites! "

Ivo grinned. " ' Never shake thy gory locks at me,' " he said. " I am stabbed with a white wench's black eye, and you should know how vulnerable I am. Tell me, could it really be— "

" Carmela Mountfort. Of course. Kairos' latest. As bees to honey, or am I getting the facts of life confused? " She put her arms up to him. " Ivo, let's dance."

Ivo looked owlish. " Have you ever watched an elephant in a circus, when he climbs up on a little tub, wiggles his drooping rump, and lifts his great forefeet—one, two—in time to the music? Me, dance? Let me get you a drink."

He led her to the buffet, into a crowd of people, and put a drink in her hand. Everybody was talking at once, and no one noticed when he stole off.

He shouldered his way across the room and stood squarely in front of Carmela.

She was tall, attired in a blood-red gown, adorned with a fine gold throat-chain that held a burst of jewels at her breast. She saw him and smiled. " I don't know you, but I'd like to. Yes, I might like that."

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"But who does not know the greatest actress since Duse?" Ivo said. "Many times and in many places I've sat at the feet of the incomparable Carmela Mountfort. Literally, in the orchestra stalls. I couldn't otherwise believe that any mere human could have such passionate eyes.

"Will you dance?"

Carmela looked at the men round her, and slid into his arms. After a while she said, "I guessed as much. You're very light on your feet."

"For such a lump?"

She laughed. "Who are you? What are you?"

"The full sum of me is sum of nothing. Name's Noel."

"Like Christmas. Exciting!"

"Herein Fortune shows herself more kind than is her custom. I, who was poor this noon, have now a nameless treasure. Though not to say nameless, exactly."

She looked up at him curiously.

"You are the hopeful lady of my earth." Ivo purred the classical lines. "The all-seeing sun ne'er saw your match since first the world begun. Earth-treading star— "

"He's mad," she purred. "I adore it."

"I am but mad north-north-west." He eyed the jewel on her white flesh. "When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw."

"Aha, now I've got it. Shakespeare." She laughed happily. "Did you ever see me play Lady Macbeth?"

"The part is much too old for you, though you and a dagger go naturally together. You inspire madness."

She reached up to straighten his tie. "Let's go out to the terrace. All this noise."

They leaned on a balcony and breathed the fragrance of the garden.

"Where's our host?" Ivo lit cigarettes. "I haven't seen Kairos at all tonight."

"Business, he told me. He had to leave."

"And abandon you? He must be out of his mind."

"Do you think so?" She lifted the jewels at her throat. "He gave me these. Is he out of his mind, do you think, or am I, to accept these diamonds?"

"It's my belief that rich men exist merely to set a proper frame for beauty," Ivo said. "It hurts me when they fail. I'm disappointed that you allowed it."

Her eyes widened. "What can you mean?"

He flicked the pendant contemptuously. "Diamonds, madam, they ain't."

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She drew a hissing breath. Like lightning her hand lashed out and scratched red welts along his cheek. She turned. Ivo watched her go imperiously from him.

He backed into the shadows and dabbed with a handkerchief at his face. At the far end of the terrace he saw a streak of light through drawn curtains. He moved cautiously, and peered in.

A man was seated at a desk with his back to the window. Ivo saw his polished fingernails in the light of the desk lamp. He saw Napoleon's tapestry lying limp across the back of a chair, with golden bees glinting in its folds.

Ivo rapped on the glass. The man inside reached into a drawer. Then he came over to unlock the french window and opened it a crack.

"Pancho?" he said. "Did you bring him?" The blue steel automatic was too large in his hand.

Ivo pushed the window wide. "Excuse me. Scratched myself out there, a branch or something. I'm not disturbing you, Mr. Kairos?" He walked in. "Ah, good! I see you found it."

Spruce as a bantam cock, Kairos held the gun level. "Found what?"

"Prince Pavel's passion, that bit of rag there. He told me it had been stolen."

Kairos gestured with the gun. "Sit down. What else did he tell you about it?"

"You mean its history? Louis Napoleon and so forth?" Ivo smiled. "Please put that gun away. It terrifies me."

"I doubt it. You see I know you. You have a reputation, Noel; and not only for the way you speak."

"Overblown, would you consider it?"

Kairos cocked an eye at him. "So the Prince hired you to find his tapestry? I can save him the expense. Take it. I make him a present of it."

"Now that's extremely generous of you."

Ivo took the velvet on his knees and began to stroke its pile. Suddenly he stopped. His finger had caught in a slit.

He turned the material over. There were rows and rows of small slits. Most of them had been neatly sewn up again, but there were new, gaping cuts.

Ivo sighed.

Kairos was watching him. "I'd like to make His Highness a present of the thief as well. That damned renegade cook of his, that Antoine. Unfortunately—" He moved the lamp an inch and sat on the desk. "Perhaps you can help me."

"How?"

"Antoine has disappeared. I sent Pancho to fetch him, but

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he wasn't to be found. My boy is still searching. As a matter of fact, I thought you were he. At this moment, Mr. Noel, Antoine is undoubtedly dangerous. Hence the gun." He put it trimly in his pocket. "Now, if you can help me," he went on, "I'll make it worth your trouble. Say twenty thousand pesos if you bring him to me tonight."

"That's a lot of money for a cook."

Kairos shrugged. "I'd like to make the gesture to the Prince. His tapestry; his thief."

"You have the tapestry," Ivo said. "Why not let the poor devil go?"

Kairos stroked his nose. "Thirty thousand."

"These wretched scratches," Ivo mumbled. "They're beginning to sting. I'd better have them looked at." He got slowly to his feet. The velvet cloth fell from his lap.

"No, Mr. Kairos, I think not. Good night, sir. Thank you for your hospitality."

He forced himself to walk normally. At the door he said, "I'll tell the Prince you'll return his tapestry." The back of his neck was prickling as he went out.

It took him a while to get through the crowded ballroom. In the street he climbed into his car and sat thinking.

If I were a cook; Ivo asked himself, where the devil would I hide? I'd be too fat to crawl into one of my own pots— Ah, you think so? He turned on the ignition and pulled quickly away from the line of parked cars. Before long a dark, handsome car eased out behind him . . .

No moonlight reached into the corridors of the Popocatepetl Yacht Club as Ivo passed silently through them. He hesitated outside the kitchen, and behind him a quick shadow melted into the blackness. The door was open. He shrugged and went in under the single lit bulb.

"Assez. Stop!"

Ivo moved only his eyes. "Come forth, thou fearful man."

Clutching a meat cleaver, Antoine crept out of the farthest gloom. "Monsieur Noel. I should have known; you, too." His breath whistled in his nose.

"Me and Kairos," Ivo said. "Time is running very short. Where are they?"

"The tapestry? I tried to make that clear to you this morning."

"I'm more interested in the honey."

"And not only you."

"I know. The difference is, I want to return them to the Prince."

Antoine laughed mockingly.

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"Don't be an ass," Ivo said. "You can't possibly get rid of them. Give them to me and we'll say no more about it." He came forward.

The cook raised his cleaver. "Keep away, I beg you!"

Ivo advanced a step. "Antoine, you're scared. You're sweating. Be sensible. You're not a fighting man."

"No, but a desperate one. I warn you, keep back."

"You should be glad I found you before Kairos did." Ivo took another step. "I'm not armed, so put that down and let's talk. You can trust me."

"You? Why should I?"

"Good heavens, you don't think I want to steal them?"

"Yes. The way that pig Kairos tried!"

"But I thought you were working with him?" Ivo saw the sweat beading the cook's lip.

Antoine gulped. He lifted the cleaver high above his head.

From the blackness beyond came an ominously-quiet voice. "And I thought you were working with me, too."

Kairos was standing in the door, his hat pulled low and the lapels of his coat covering his shirt front. The gun was dark in his gloved fist.

Antoine began to shiver. His arms came slowly down, and the cleaver rattled on the floor.

Kairos kept them covered. "You should have accepted my offer," he said to Ivo. "Didn't you wonder why I let you go so easily? It was clever of you to think of this place. And now your work is done."

"Not quite. I still haven't found them."

"Antoine wouldn't tell you? Perhaps he'll talk to me."

The dark figure of a Mexican slid into the kitchen. Kairos raised inquiring eyes; the Mexican shook his head.

Kairos looked round, stroking his nose. "The trouble with this place," he said, "is that one doesn't know where to begin to look. What we need is a quiet talk. Not here—we may be interrupted." His gun nudged them to the door. "If you please," he said.

Antoine filled his lungs and opened his mouth to yell. Kairos gestured, "Pancho!"

The Mexican took two steps and chopped his hand into Antoine's neck. The cook dropped like a sack.

"I hope you won't make that mistake, Mr. Noel," Kairos smiled. "Let's go. Quietly."

The Mexican took the cook's arm across his shoulder and lifted his feet clear of the floor. Kairos walked behind Ivo.

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Under a dead street lamp the Mexican hefted his load into the back of the dark car. Ivo got in, then Kairos. The limousine sped through forsaken streets.

Kairos spoke once, "It's a pity we have to take you along, Mr. Noel. You pose a problem."

The Mexican braked the car into a familiar drive. Ivo noticed that there were now no cars parked outside Kairos' house.

Pancho opened the door and prodded Antoine. The cook moaned, stirred.

"Make him walk," Kairos said, "the air will revive him." They crossed the moon-striped garden and entered by the far window that Ivo had used before.

Antoine staggered into a chair. Ivo sat down by him and watched Kairos bolt the window. Pancho flicked on the ceiling light.

"It's so much easier to talk here." Kairos moved the desk lamp to shine full on Ivo and the cook. "Antoine, suppose you begin."

The cook's voice was a painful rasp. "I say nothing."

"One way or another, you will," Kairos said. He looked at Pancho. Pancho moved towards Antoine. "Why not make it easy for both of us?"

"I spit on you!" Antoine croaked—and spat.

The Mexican smashed his knuckles into the cook's mouth.

"You never were a hero," Kairos said. "Why try? Just tell me where you put them."

"I spit on you twice!" He spat again.

The Mexican raised his fist.

"You might as well talk," Ivo urged mildly.

Antoine licked his cut lip. "So you can get your share?"

"There's no gratitude in this scum," Kairos sighed. "After I saved the idiot's life."

"Saved!" Antoine was trembling. "You mean ruined."

Kairos sneered. "When the German army was rolling through northern France, our brave little cook turned tail and ran. He shot his lieutenant first. Stupid fool, he could have waited twelve hours and spared himself the trouble."

"How do you know this?" Ivo asked.

"He came to me in Saint-Jean-de-Luz. The harbour was jammed, but I went to some trouble to help him get away."

"I paid you for it," the cook said hoarsely. "Every sou I owned. I've been paying you ever since."

"And now, when I ask a favour," Kairos continued, "he cheats me."

"You forced me to rob the only friend I have." Tears

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gathered in Antoine's eyes. "It was like stealing from my father."

"How sad. So you brought me the empty shell and kept the rest for yourself."

"I made sure you wouldn't get them—blackmailing swine!"

Kairos started. His gun whipped across the cook's face.

"No." Ivo spoke gently. "Fish not with this melancholy bait for this fool gudgeon."

Kairos' nostrils were pinched white. "You refused me once tonight, Mr. Noel. I'll try again. If you can locate the stones—"

"What are they? How much are they worth?"

"Diamonds, as you've already guessed. Worth to you, when you bring them here, thirty thousand."

"In that case, their value must be quite a bit higher. Could you trust me?"

"Pancho will be at your side. Now, either you agree to help me—and incidentally do yourself some good—or I pick up this phone and turn you both in as thieves. I could even shoot you in self-defence. Who would contradict—?"

Ivo stopped him.

"I've changed my mind," he said to the cook. "The diamonds are useless to you now; but don't, for heaven's sake, tell Kairos where they are."

Antoine took his hands from his face and stared at Ivo.

"Shut up!" Kairos barked. "This pig is going to squeal and you won't stop him. Pancho!"

Before the Mexican could move, loud pounding hammered the door. Ivo swallowed his breath. The banging continued, augmented with kicks on the lower panel.

Kairos backed against the desk, his finger tight on the trigger. The Mexican pulled a knife from his belt, walked across the room, and turned the knob. He inched the door open.

It was flung back in his face.

"Get out of my way, you monstrous baboon! Where is he?" She stormed in like a Valkyrie. "How dare you keep me waiting! Me, Carmela Mountfort. How dare you!"

"Carmela, please. Not now." Kairos' voice had an angry cadence.

"Yes, now! Do you think I'm to be kept waiting like a chorus girl? I demand to know about this!" She flaunted the pendant under his nose.

"Go ahead and tell her." Ivo shifted in his chair. "We don't mind waiting."

Kairos whirled on him. "Don't try anything."

Carmela's fist beat on the desk. "Don't interrupt! Tell me

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the truth, did you try to palm off your filthy imitation diamonds on me?"

"Get out of here," Kairos said savagely, not even looking at her. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"To the devil with your business! Answer me, are these paste?"

"Of course they're paste," Ivo said. He gauged the distance between himself and the gun. It was dangerously far. He glanced at the cook.

"You cheap rat!" Carmela tore the bauble from her throat and flung it at Kairos' feet.

"All right, they're paste!" Kairos shouted. "Now shut up, or do I have to close your mouth for you? Pancho, hold her quiet!"

It took only seconds. Carmela seized the lamp and hurled it. Kairos ducked. The lamp's cord snaked out; for a moment it entangled the Mexican.

"Now!" Ivo yelled.

He launched himself low. From the corner of his eye he saw Antoine get to his feet. Kairos jerked the trigger. Ivo heard the bullet snick past him. The Mexican flicked his wrist, and an icicle stabbed high in Ivo's shoulder. He fell on Kairos and wrenched the gun from his fingers. "Watch the other," he called.

There was no reply.

Ivo held the gun on the two men. "Antoine." He glanced swiftly behind him and saw the cook, face down, on the carpet.

He straightened slowly. "Carmela."

She came to him. "You're bleeding."

She touched the handle of the knife that was angled in above his armpit.

"All right," he nodded. He grunted as she pulled it away. He put the gun in her hand. "Shoot if they move."

"Even before." Carmela smiled wickedly.

Ivo knelt and eased the cook over. A wet stain darkened Antoine's shirt, low down. His breathing was ragged.

"Hold on," Ivo said to him.

Slowly the cook's eyes focused, he tried to grin. "Monsieur Noel, how were the bonbons?" he whispered. Then he was staring at nothing.

Ivo looked at the body. After a long minute he picked up the phone.

Night was lifting into dawn as Ivo climbed once more to the top of the patio steps. By his side Carmela held the tapestry

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regally around her shoulders against the cool, thin air. There was no need to knock.

Through the door that had been forced they could see overturned chairs, ripped cushions, the rug flung back.

Ivo found the Prince in his bedroom, on a gutted mattress, gagged and trussed with the sheets. "Pancho's whimsical touch," Ivo said grimly.

He called to Carmela for brandy.

The Prince lay inert as Ivo worked over the knots, but a spark of life leapt in his eyes when Carmela came through the door. She shrugged the tapestry off her shoulders and held a glass to his lips. He brushed it feebly aside.

Ivo could barely catch his words. "You've got it, thank God!"

"There's no hurry now."

Ivo took the glass and forced brandy down the reluctant throat. The old man spluttered as Ivo rubbed the blood back into his arms and propped pillows under his frail shoulders. Then Ivo laid the tapestry in his lap.

The Prince's anxious hands groped among the folds. He clawed, he looked, he clawed again. He lifted the tapestry and shook it with all his strength. Then he fell back exhausted. "Dead," he muttered. "All my bees are dead."

"Your Highness, the honey is safe," Ivo said to him.

The old eyes flew open. "You've got them?"

"What honey?" Carmela said.

"Where are they? Are they all there?"

Ivo held up his hand. "I am Sir Oracle, and when I ope my lips let no dog bark!" He waited for silence. Briefly he related the night's events. "So," he came to an end, "in his red blood Antoine's day is set."

The Prince sighed.

"The poor unhappy man," he said. "He should have come to me for help. I always believed he was my friend."

"He was," Ivo said. "When he found out what Kairos was really after, he put the diamonds—" He interrupted himself. "My dear sir, how thoughtless of me. You must be famished." He hurried out of the room.

"Dammit, come back," the Prince called. "Where did he put them?"

Ivo returned with a large dish of bonbons. He stirred them about. Some were decorated with spirals, some with stars, some circles. "Try this." Mentally keeping his fingers crossed, he held one out.

"In heaven's name, not now." The Prince tried to turn his head aside. "Oh, if I must!"

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He bit; his teeth grated. He spat. A pistachio-flavoured diamond lay in his palm.

"Careful, you'll make yourself sick." Ivo moved the dish away as the Prince reached eagerly for more. "I was afraid I would have to feed you a dozen of these abominations before we struck the first one." He looked at the lady. "Have you been introduced? This is Carmela, to whose glorious indignation we both owe everything."

In bed, the old Prince sketched a bow.

Suddenly Ivo grinned like a schoolboy.

"There's a game called Russian roulette. You know it? Honour, I think, demands that we give Carmela a round of that absorbing sport."

His eyes screwed shut, Ivo's hand hovered over the dish. Daintily he picked out a bonbon between finger and thumb. The Prince's hand plucked nervously at his throat as Ivo held it up and proffered it with a flourish.

Carmela bared her teeth in a brilliant smile. She leaned forward and bit.

★ ★ ★

OUT FOR A SAIL OUT

Whether it's round the bay or over the duckpond, if you are a poor sailor, here's something to keep your mind occupied and your endolymph swinging anti-clockwise. Out for a duck? Solutions on page 143.

1. *Which King was nicknamed the Flute Player? What did he play?*
2. *Which Queen was first introduced to her lover wrapped in a carpet? And who had himself similarly introduced to Sarah Bernhardt?*
3. *Why is a tangerine so called?*
4. *How is a dog connected with the history of the telephone?*
5. *Of what river was the Thames originally a tributary?*
6. *Which Cambridge College has a quadrangle?*
7. *What writers do you associate with:*
   - *a. The Naulahka;*
   - *b. The Never-Never Land;*
   - *c. Nanki-Poo;*
   - *d. Nightmare Abbey;*
   - *e. The Nutmeg Tree.*
8. *What is the legal difference between a child and a young person?*
9. *How many gallons does a Texan* 10*-gallon hat hold?*

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THE MOLE

It was my first breathtaking, stupefying summer of learning to see

BY NICHOLAS DEE

IT was the summer I learnt to paint. All my recollections of Rose and the Captain are tied up with the warm, penetrating smell of turpentine, and the sticky, buttery feel of oilpaints on the palette under my knife, the bits of charcoal that always found their way to the bottom of the box and turned to black dust, and the rough, inviting whiteness of a canvas all stretched and ready for me to turn it into a jungle of colours out on the warpath to slaughter each other. Marvellous!

This isn't my story at all, and yet the fact that it was my first breathtaking, stupefying summer of learning to *see*, that the whole world had just broken open for me like a rainbow-coloured egg, that I was in among them being aware and loving all their oddities, made the story wholly mine.

Of course the whole art-school business was farcical. The Captain—and though I pity him in retrospect, I have no hesitation in saying that he was the most complete swine, both sanctimonious and sadistic, that I have ever met—had decided to take in paying guests and teach them to paint. When he retired from his ocean liner he had rapidly discovered that pensioned-off life was by no means on the same scale as entertaining V.I.P.s at the captain's table.

Guided by an article in the paper, he bought a small yawl and moored it in the harbour of Barron-les-Prats where the cost of living was supposed to be the lowest in Europe and the climate, except when the mistral was blowing, suitable for his tendency to asthma. Rose's preferences were not consulted.

I don't know what gave him the idea of teaching art, except that he had occasionally passed the time producing bluff, sea-doggish seascapes in the intervals of harrying the purser. However it began, it proved to be quite a paying occupation. His advertisement appeared regularly in all the weeklies, and netted him a steady fifteen or twenty victims each summer.

At the time I'm speaking of there were three of us—Emil, a big, blond, Belgian boy, son of a wealthy boot-manufacturer, who

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was filling in time till he started in the business at Christmas; Glyn, small, dark, reserved, and Welsh; and myself. And Rose, of course.

Rose was the Captain's daughter. She slept on board with him. The rest of us lodged at Gaston's, the café by the harbour, and ate our meals on board. Rose cooked them. She was an inspired cook: the things she could do with the local sardines, the wine, the olive oil, artichokes, and saffron from the quay market would make an angel turn his halo into a begging-bowl.

"Can't you give us a chop, Rose, something we can recognise?" the Captain would say, picking over his fritto misto. It was the only way in which she asserted her independence; otherwise she was his slave. I often wonder if she cooks like that now, or if it was the summer working in her, as it was in me, stimulating her to produce those culinary miracles.

Between meals we didn't see much of her. She was a quiet girl, rather slow, with beautiful, secretive, dark-brown eyes; she wore smocks which she made herself, and was generally at work on a piece of embroidery, if the Captain wasn't screaming at her to do some job for him.

The Captain was big and bald and burly and shipshape; always neat as a bit of splicing, brass buttons all aglitter with holystone and elbowgrease and pride. Rose got him his button-hole fresh every day from the market, a pink or a tea-rose; and he always wore starched, dazzling linen and little navy-blue bow ties. He had a high-pitched, nagging whine that could be heard from one side of the harbour to the other, especially if it was addressed to Rose or Glyn. He loathed Glyn, who was plainly terrified of him, and used to go out of his way to humiliate the boy.

The first thing I heard when I arrived there was this whine.

"By heaven, boy," the Captain was crying nasally, "by heaven, d'you expect *me* to walk through the harbour carrying a bucket of garbage? *Me?* Or Rose? Take it, boy, take it, and hurry up about it. By heaven, that's no way to carry a bucket; if I saw a man on my ship with a posture like that he'd have an hour's PT every day before he came on watch till he was a different shape."

"Supposing he was a passenger?" murmured Emil. He was sitting in the blazing sun on the cabin roof, at work on a child's-picture-book impression, all in primary colours, of Barron-les-Prats rising like the flutes of an organ up the silver-green hill.

The Captain took no notice of this impertinence and Glyn was too far away to be comforted, staggering unhappily along the quayside with his bucket of rubbish. A good many idlers,

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roused from midday somnolence by the Captain's shrill tones, watched derisively.

"Why not chuck it in the harbour, young 'un?" a sailor asked good-naturedly. "Everyone else does."

"Don't tempt the poor boy," his mate said, digging him in the ribs, "you know the stiffnecked old sod won't allow it. Ah, les Anglais! Mad, to a man."

Suddenly a portentous thing happened. From a scarlet door in the raffish-looking little house next to Gaston's emerged the figure of Liliane, the most notable personage in Barron. She wore a flamingo-coloured wrapper, she was yawning profusely, some of her hair was piled on top of her head and the rest hung in a sort of Lautrec-tangle down her back; she had one mule and one bare foot.

In two leisurely strides she crossed to Glyn who had his eyes on the cobbles and didn't see her till she intercepted him. Tenderly, solicitously, she relieved him of the bucket, tossed the contents into the bright-green harbour, and then returned it to him, together with a kiss that made the sailors exclaim, "Alors—!" in tones of wonder.

Then she turned and yelled across the harbour at the Captain, "Keep your voice down, you old goat! You woke me up!" And with a cheerful and totally unsubtle gesture at her audience she strolled back indoors.

The effect on the Captain was electrifying. When he was angry he went white, not red, and swelled up like an evil toad, watering at the eyes. Rose received the brunt of it, because she came innocently out of the after-cabin at that moment to cut thin brown bread-and-butter for tea, and asked, "Who was that?"

Glyn was just returning with his bucket. I was dropping my rucksack over the harbour wall.

"How any daughter of mine," the Captain began—he had only one—"can have the effrontery to soil her lips by referring openly—*openly*—to that shameless, painted trollop who ought to be publicly flogged and run out of town—"

Then, looking round, he saw how he had us all hanging on his words, and how the lounging matelots had moved up so as not to miss any of the fun.

"Get below," he snapped at Rose, "and keep your nose out of what's none of your business. If I find that any of the rest of you have been consorting with that strumpet, you'll go straight home by the next train. As for *you*—" he turned on the luckless Glyn and would have pulverised him, had he not suddenly become aware of my arrival.

"Captain Rutherford?" I said. "I'm Christopher Sand."

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"Ah, my dear boy! Glad to meet you, glad to meet you," he said, becoming all of a sudden intensely breezy and seamanlike.

Glyn slipped past me down the companionway. Emil grinned at me conspiratorially from the cabin roof and, unseen by the Captain, pretended to be about to drop his canvas, paint-side down, on the bald head that shone just a foot below him.

Tea was a stiff and formal meal. Afterwards the Captain stalked off for what he called his constitutional, out to the end of the harbour mole and back. Beyond the mole great green seas were visible, lifting and falling, lifting and falling. It was hot and quiet.

Coming on deck with my paints, I averted my eyes from the galley where Glyn, who had not appeared at tea, was shaking with nerves, and Rose was comforting him. I think it gave her a kind of mild pleasure to meet with someone more vulnerable than herself.

Emil beckoned me off the boat. We sauntered up a narrow, crooked street away from the harbour, and sat at a terrace café drinking vermouth cassis.

"Some day," said Emil, who had been to school in England and spoke the language better than a native, "that boy is going to murder the Captain. I hope I shall be there to see. Do you know he has been saving for five years, ever since he was fifteen, to come out here and learn to paint, and what does he get for it? Abuse, a chance to carry buckets of garbage, and a few lessons in perspective that he could have found out for himself by reading the encyclopædia. Me, I don't mind—it's my father's money, and anyway I like this place. Wait till I introduce you to Deux Sous."

"Deux Sous?"

"Liliane," Emil explained knowledgeably. "The girl on the quay."

"Why is she called Deux Sous?"

"Because she has a mole as big as a penny piece. She is very proud of it—she says it shows she belongs to the Devil. Oh, she is a handsome girl," said Emil enthusiastically. "You will like her very much, I am sure."

"I am sure I shall."

Actually, though I did go once or twice with Emil to visit Liliane, and found her highly stimulating, I was so engrossed in paint that summer that I had little energy to spare for any other occupation. The Captain for the most part left me alone.

"Hm, funny sort of colour you're making that sea," he would occasionally puff over my shoulder. "Call that a ship, my boy? Capsize if you loaded three sardines in her," and he'd stump

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off, leaving me blissfully immersed in my greens and white, in search of more responsive prey. Glyn was made to his hand.

"Scrape it out, scrape it out!" I'd hear the Captain nasally yelling. "By grief, *you* ought to be able to paint a cutter. Father in the Merchant Navy, wasn't he? Look at it, look at it; use your eyes, can't you?"

Half an hour with the Captain wheezing and snarling behind him usually reduced Glyn to a state in which he couldn't even draw a straight line. And then the Captain would stride virtuously off for his constitutional, and Rose would come stealing out to comfort Glyn, telling him she thought his picture was very pretty. She didn't really think so. In fact there was a touch of genius about his painting, but Rose was not the girl to appreciate that, it was just her kind heart. Maybe it was this that led to the affair with Glyn, for Emil was the one she was in love with.

When she didn't think she was observed, I'd see her sometimes looking at Emil with a sort of hopeless worship, like a child gazing at an expensive Teddy-bear through a plate-glass window. He never took the slightest notice of her. Son of a wealthy bourgeois, he was adept at avoiding matrimonial hazards.

In the evenings the Captain often departed to play canasta with an English couple who had a villa called Les Mimosas somewhere up at the top of the cliff.

He laid down a strict set of rules for us in his absence, saying that he was in loco parentis to us, that we were never to forget that we were representing Britain abroad, and that accordingly our behaviour was to be impeccable. Liliane, of course, was number one prohibition on his list. Grudgingly he agreed that as we were all over twenty we might visit cafés, but we were to drink wine, not spirits.

"And in bed by eleven sharp, mind. You can't paint on an empty stomach or after a white night," said the Captain sententiously. "Rose looks after your stomachs, I look after your morals." Emil grinned privately to himself.

Poor Rose was not allowed off the boat at all after sundown, and if we stayed to keep her company it had to be all three of us; one or two was not considered sufficient chaperonage. Heaven knows what orgies the Captain thought we might perpetrate.

He himself always came striding smartly along the quayside at ten-fifty-five, neither early nor late, from his canasta sessions, and threw some searching glances about the yawl, as if he expected to find feathers, or pillows, or empty champagne glasses. All he

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ever did find was the saucepan in which Rose had cooked up a brewing of fudge.

Emil and I were frankly bored by these evenings on board ship; Emil had other interests, and I was painting a moonscape of Barron from the phare on the harbour mole and wanted to get on with it. But it seemed unkind to leave Rose on her own, and Glyn, of course, wanted to be with her; he was utterly bewitched by her.

One shiny night we suggested that Glyn should take her for a walk instead of the usual fudge party; we would all reassemble at a quarter to eleven and lie our heads off to the Captain.

I thought Rose looked at us strangely when the plan was broached; particularly at Emil she looked strangely. But she said in her accustomed quiet way that, yes, it was a beautiful night for a walk, yes, she'd like to—and so a new routine was built up for the Captain's canasta nights: Rose and Glyn would saunter off along the mole, Emil would make for his favourite dive of the moment, and I'd either accompany him or do some work. Glyn was plainly bemused by his luck; he'd never have had the courage to suggest the plan himself. Of course it was inevitable that sooner or later we'd be late back.

One evening things had gone badly for Emil; he'd begun by tapping on Liliane's back door, but she was engaged with a client and shouted to him to go away. He went to a Basque café and lost a lot of money playing belote with the sailors, and then he insisted on dragging me away from my easel to help him drown his annoyances. When we looked at our watches it was five minutes past eleven.

Emil by this time was fairly lit up. "Come on, Cinderella," he said, grabbing me by the arm, "jump into your pumpkin, mon vieux," and he rushed me along the quay singing a French equivalent of *Call me early, mother dear.*

Glyn and Rose were waiting by the mole, Rose looking very nervous. Bad as it was to be out at all, it would be as much as her life was worth to return alone with one young man. Emil dropped my arm, took hers, and hustled her off towards the boat, calling back, "Come along, slow-coaches," to Glyn and me.

"Chris—wait," said Glyn. His voice was full of strain.

"What is it?"

"I can't take Rose out any more."

"Why not?" I said impatiently. "I thought you worshipped the girl. Come on, we must catch them."

"It's not that." I could see his face in the moonlight; it was rapt, exhausted, full of a sort of terror. "I—I'd do anything

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for her. But sometimes I think she hates me. She said this evening, 'Come on, kiss me—that's what you're here for, isn't it?' She frightens me, Chris. She's terribly unhappy."

"Oh, come on," I said, "we'll thrash it out in the morning."

But when we reached the boat it was too late.

The Captain had been there to receive Emil and Rose, and all hell was loose. Emil was usually quite imperturbable, but whatever the Captain had been saying to him had got under even his tough skin. He was white with rage, and we arrived just in time to stop him hitting the old boy with a belaying-pin.

The Captain was not his usual trim self, either: his tie and buttonhole were missing, his shirt-collar was rumpled; fleetingly I wondered if he could be drunk.

"You'll have to marry her after this!" he shouted.

"Oh shut up, Father; don't be a fool," Rose said. She was seated on the cabin coaming, quiet, self-controlled, and pale.

The Captain turned on her savagely, but one of his asthma spasms overtook him: he gasped and gasped, clutched for air, and began to wheeze out, "Rose! Rose! Quick, help me!"

"All right, Father," Rose said. She was quick and efficient; evidently this was familiar routine. While we stood about helplessly she got him into the cabin, and sat him down with a smelling-bottle under his nose. We could hear him sucking up the fumes in long, sobbing breaths, coughing and rasping.

"Can we do anything?" I asked awkwardly.

"No, thanks," Rose said. She flashed us a cold look. "Better get to bed."

"Don't leave me, Rosie," we heard the Captain moaning. "Are you there? Don't leave your old father."

"I won't leave you," she said. "I'll never leave you."

"The old swine. The old camel," Emil was muttering as we walked along the quay to Gaston's. "The old hypocrite. He'll be sorry he said those things to me."

The Captain had touched off some black, smouldering streak of primitive Flemish savagery which ran beneath his blond and smiling aplomb.

Next day the scene was not alluded to. The Captain was his usual self, only more so. Rose was completely silent. Glyn didn't even try to paint, but spent the day fishing off the harbour wall. Emil appeared early in the morning, collected a couple of sketches, heads of Rose he'd done a few days before, and then disappeared, no one knew where. He hadn't spoken to any of us. But during the afternoon he returned.

"Come along, Chris," he said. "I want to show you something."

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I was painting the houses at the foot of the cliff on the eastern promontory: chocolate-brown façades, with doors all colours from turquoise to mustard to indigo; and just at that moment two girls in brilliant coats, one puce and one crimson, chose to stroll along, passing each door in turn. It was like notes on a xylophone.

"Oh, go away, blast you, I'm busy," I said, but he insisted on my going with him—practically dragged me. He took me to the loft behind Gaston's that we used for painting if it was rainy or cold or if the mistral was blowing.

On the easel was a large canvas with the paint still wet, and when I saw the subject I gasped.

Emil had transferred one of his heads of Rose, and grafted it on to a magnificent nude body which I had no difficulty in recognising as that of Liliane; apart from anything else, the mole was unmistakable. She was reclining with Titian-like abandon among a tangle of spars, sails, and fishing-nets; a ray of stormy sunshine gilded and illuminated the resplendent tones of the flesh; in the background rose a green and angry sea.

It was a gorgeous bit of work; the white heat of rage had opened in Emil some hitherto undiscovered door, and he'd painted every stroke as if he could only just restrain himself from thrusting his brush clean through the canvas.

"Good lord," I said, "what's the idea? It's damned fine, but you'd better stow it away somewhere before the Captain sees it."

"Not likely," he said. "I'm going to exhibit it."

"But, Emil, you can't! What about Rose? You couldn't do anything more hideously cruel to her."

"Cruel?" he said carelessly. "Huh! You should hear what Glyn says about her. She won't be worried. But it will stick a dart into that fat old pig's complacency."

Nothing I could say would make him change his mind.

The town had a little one-horse gallery, mostly full of pink-and-blue landscapes intended to be bought by summer visitors; and here, in three or four days, as soon as the paint was dry, Emil took his portrait. Velvet-slippered old Cardoux, the proprietor, gave it a place of honour, and it blazed out among the other pictures like a geranium in a bed of sweet peas.

Within half an hour most of the town had heard, by tomtom or grapevine, of Liliane's proxy portrait, and had come hot-foot to admire it. The general opinion among the male population was that it was a masterpiece of likeness, particularly the mole.

Liliane herself was there, having risen at an unprecedentedly early hour for her, splendidly dressed in a wasp-waisted costume,

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immense jabot, and five-inch heels. She screeched with pleasure at the portrait, " I didn't know you had it in you, mon vieux! " and kissed Emil with two resounding smacks. Everyone applauded, and Gaston offered Emil a huge sum in francs for the picture, a sum that would have paid for the whole summer's expenses.

But Emil, who had quite recovered his good spirits, said the picture was a present to Liliane.

" I shall hang it in my boudoir, mon cher," she said gaily. " With a little curtain over the face, don't you see, because the face, naturally, might feel somewhat strange in such an unaccustomed milieu."

Her friends were congratulating her on this ingenious idea when the Captain arrived. Rose was with him, and Glyn behind them. The group melted tactfully to the other end of the gallery so that they could admire the picture undisturbed. It was not a long inspection. The Captain gave it a quick once-over, Rose barely glanced. Then they left again, swiftly.

Glyn scrutinised it with care, turned a painful red that must have begun at his toes and, coming over to where Emil stood, struck him in the face. His eyes were full of tears.

Emil was more astonished than hurt. But he wasn't interested in Glyn's reactions. He pursued the Captain and Rose, almost running. Even so, they were back at the boat before he caught them up. " Well? " he panted. " Do you like it? "

The Captain gave him one stony, livid look. Then he turned to Rose.

" Go on," he said to her. " Pack. Get your things together. I'm not having you on my boat any more. I don't know when you found time to pose for that obscene bit of work and I'm not going to inquire; I'm a decent man and would prefer not to hear about it. I don't want to see your face again. Clear out."

" But, Captain," I exclaimed, " you must know that it wasn't Rose. It was a joke— "

" Be quiet, Christopher," he said. " This is none of your business. I know nothing of the sort. As for you—" he was writing, and now he turned to Emil and gave him a cheque, presumably the fees he'd been paid—" get back to your Brussels boot-factory, or the gutter, whichever you prefer."

One had to hand it to the Captain; he had a dignity of his own. But then Emil crumpled it.

He pulled out of his pocket a navy-blue bow tie. Taking the cheque, he tore it carelessly in half, letting the fragments flutter on to the deck. " Oh by the way, Captain," he said slowly and insolently, " I think this tie belongs to you. I found it one night at Liliane's."

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For a second the Captain looked utterly blank. Then he thrust the tie in his pocket, ignoring it.

Rose came on deck with her suitcase. He ignored her, too.

"I'll carry your case to the station, Rose," Glyn said, jumping to take it.

"Thanks," she said, offhand. She and Emil exchanged one inimical look, and then she was gone. I heard afterwards that Glyn escorted her all the way to London, and there she brushed him off. He never painted another picture.

Emil left the same afternoon. I stayed on a few days to finish my picture of the harbour. Several times I tried to persuade the Captain to forgive Rose, reiterating that the portrait was really Liliane. But what was the use? He knew that as well as I did. He had taken his line and he was sticking to it, though I could see he missed Rose painfully, and was scared of what would happen if he should have an asthma attack when he was on his own. He tried to persuade me to stay on, but my money had run out.

"Look after him a bit, will you?" I said to Liliane.

"Sure," she said. "I'll keep an eye on the old hypocrite."

She may have done her best, but it was not good enough, for a couple of months later I read in the paper that the Captain had been knocked over by a wave when he was walking on the mole in one of the autumn gales, and had been drowned before rescuers could reach him. Had he really fallen, or had he jumped, I wondered? Pride and fear and loneliness can take a man to strange places.

Emil's pictures are now sold at prices that only millionaires can afford. If the portrait of Rose ever came on the market it would be worth a fabulous sum.

I was talking over old times with Emil not long ago. "At least I rescued Rose from life with that terrible Captain," he said. "She has that to thank me for." But I am not so sure.

Once when I was in Cheltenham I called on Rose, for the sake of the past, and out of curiosity to see what sort of man she had married. He was the exact replica of the Captain, only thirty years younger. He even suffered from asthma.

I feel fairly sure Rose has never told him that her portrait adorns a parlour of joy somewhere on the French Atlantic coast.

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INVOICE TONIGHT?

June is the month of wedding and cooing. The billing follows.

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SUMMER'S LEASE

She lay in the third cocoon
her fingers touching across her breast

BY JOHN CHRISTOPHER

EVEN with the Summer people, Romie understood, it was customary for the children of Watchers to become Watchers in their turn.

With the Winter people, of course, there was no choice in the matter. All were Watchers. If the small population increased, that meant more free time. If it were ever to decrease, there would be longer or more frequent work shifts for all.

On his twenty-first birthday, his father took him into the main dormitories for the first time. It was a cold day in December, with snow threatening. But inside the great doors the air was warm, the duty shift dressed in light clothes, some even in shirt-sleeves or blouses.

"This is it," his father said. "Biggest in the whole world. What do you think of it?"

He looked round helplessly. Their own dormitory was a side annexe, just inside the doors, with a simple control panel manned by a dozen Summer Watchers. Here, in this vast central hall, there must be more than two hundred at work. The boards themselves were of a fantastic meaningless complexity. A light winked on one of them, and a Watcher spoke softly into the microphone before him. There was an underground staff as well, Romie remembered, four or five times as large as the controlling one.

On all sides the tunnels ramped downwards. The escalators were stilled; small scooter-trucks carried Watchers in and out of the tunnel mouths. He tried to count the tunnels, but there were too many of them.

"How many people?" he asked.

His father shrugged. "Too many. Thirty ways, each with half a million. We've been running to capacity in the last few years. You can put it at close on fourteen million, give and take a couple of hundred thousand."

The words didn't mean anything, but the thought did—the thought of a hundred thousand rooms, each stacked with more

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than a hundred cocoons, and in each cocoon a barely living, scarcely breathing, human being. His flesh prickled with revulsion at the thought. "An ant-heap," he said.

His father caught the overtone of contempt. He looked at him for a moment before speaking.

"You passed your psych. test," he said at length, "so I guess you're O.K. But you ought to watch those habits of mind. For one thing, there'll be re-checks and you won't always know about them. For another . . ." He paused.

"Winter living, as we do, we get used to the idea of an empty world. Off duty we live separate and apart. Perhaps you've never seen as many people together in one place as you have now in this control room. But don't you start despising the Summer people. We depend on them, not they on us."

Romie said, "Maybe." He gestured towards the control panel. "But if something went wrong—we could manage."

"It's all in the history books," his father said. "The world had too many people, not enough food. We learnt how to hibernate, just in time. It made sense to put the world to sleep for the winter. And there had to be some to stay awake and look after them. But they're the ones who count, not us.

"Certainly, we could manage without them. But as peasants. And old-fashioned peasants at that. It's the Summer people who produce the machines, as well as the food. We depend on them for everything. They depend on us only to look after them during the winter."

"I still think there are too many of them," Romie said.

"You don't have to like them," his father told him. "As long as you respect them, it's enough."

The Summer Watchers, because they would be the first to be awakened, were in the room nearest to the control panel. During the summer the great vaults would be empty, so few were needed. In the room were twenty cocoons, and only a dozen occupied.

Romie saw her on his first tour of inspection.

She lay in the third cocoon, her fingers touching across her breast, dark hair falling back from a pale, lovely face. He glanced, and then stared. There was a code number stamped in the plastic of the cocoon, and he checked it against his record card. Jill Duniell. Age, nineteen. Control Check Assistant.

He started to walk on, and then came back to look at her again.

Each day after that, he lingered by the cocoon. Suddenly, of all the millions who rested here in the dormitory, and in thousands of other dormitories throughout the bustling northern hemisphere, this one wakened him to the strangeness and wonder of it all.

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She was alive, but barely so, the process of living slowed down to a tenuous flicker, flesh chilled to half its normal temperature. A half of every year would be lost to this dreamless sleep, but she could expect another hundred and thirty summers of life as her normal span.

As he could of winters. A hundred and thirty years in worlds utterly separate and divided from each other.

He pressed his hands against the barely-yielding plastic, and wondered what colour her eyes would be . . .

They were blue, but so dark as to be almost violet. He watched them open, and he saw her smile.

She said, " Hullo. Time to live again? "

" March 27," he told her, as the regulations prescribed, " five degrees Centigrade, and a little late snow. Bacon and eggs for breakfast."

" Good. I love the snow. I've got an early off-duty week this year. I can do some ski-ing."

" Where do you go? "

" The French Alps. Near Chamonix."

" I've been there."

" Have you been up the téléférique to the Aiguille du Midi? "

He shook his head. " They don't run in winter. We have to make do with 'copters."

" Of course. I'd forgotten. Are you new to Watching? I haven't seen you before."

" I started last December," he said.

She smiled. " Winter privileges. We begin at eighteen. Ah well, I suppose the season's work has got to be tackled." She looked around her. " You've wakened me first. It should have been the Chief."

" I know." His eyes stared into hers. " I was hoping you would be willing to pretend to be still asleep while I did the others."

" Of course I will. Then it wasn't a mistake? But why did you do it? "

He hesitated. " Because I've watched over you since I came to the dormitory. I wanted to talk to you while we were still alone."

She said softly, " I understand. Thank you. What's your name? "

" Romie Peters."

" Sleep well, Romie," she said. " I'll watch over you."

Her voice whispered to him from a long way off, and then closer and closer.

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"Wake up, Romie. October 5, fourteen Centigrade, and a misty morning after rain. Bacon and eggs for breakfast."

He looked into her tender, smiling face. "What was summer like?"

"Patchy. We had a good August, but there was a lot of rain in the other months. There were floods in the west country, and the harvest was damaged. A stratoplane was lost in a high thunderstorm."

"And you?" he asked. "How was it with you?"

"Swimming and boating," she said. "Dancing and tennis . . . the usual things, with the usual people."

He shook his head. "I don't know them. They're no friends of mine."

She wrinkled her face, still smiling. "Are you jealous?"

"I don't dance very well. We don't do it much."

"I could teach you."

Hungrily, he said, "What else did you do?"

"What else should I do? I watched over you. You look calm when you're sleeping. All those hard, wintry lines soften out."

"Do I look hard and wintry usually?"

"Winter people always do. Haven't you noticed it? But you much less than the others. When you're happy I should think you could pass as Summer."

"I'm happy now," he said.

"I know." She sighed. "But you must pretend to be asleep now, while I wake the others."

"So soon?"

"I'm afraid so. But there will still be the two days of the change-over before I go to my cocoon."

"Two days—having to talk to each other and look at each other with formality and stiff politeness."

"Winter and Summer," she said. "That's the way it is . . ."

He went winter-sporting in January, but he reported back for duty before the fortnight was up. He went down to Jill's room, and stood quietly staring at her through the transparent shield. A curl of hair had fallen across her brow. All winter he had wanted to smooth it back. It would be another two months before the waking.

He looked at her more thoughtfully. An idea had come to him. The regulations forbade it, but regulations could be broken. Two months. It would take that long to think things over, to make his plans.

She said, "Romie! I think I was dreaming of you. I know the sleep is supposed to be dreamless, but I think I was. You

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were walking somewhere by yourself, and everything was quiet and lonely."

"Listen," he said, "I need your help."

She rebuked him. "You haven't said what date it is, or what the weather is like, or that there's bacon and eggs for breakfast. Romie, you're looking wintry and hard."

"My cocoon," he said, "in the Winter annexe—I've disconnected all the leads."

"Then it won't work?"

"No. Have you access to the main records?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Can you delete my entry?"

She understood his meaning. "You'll stay awake through the summer? But what if they find out?"

He shrugged. "They won't. It can't be hard to hide among fourteen million."

"Money? I have some, but—"

"You forget I'm from Winter. Money means nothing to us because everything is ours for the taking. I have sixteen thousand sterling put by. Is that enough?"

"More than enough. You'll be rich." Her eyes smiled at him. "Will you take me to Venice?"

"Anywhere. You'll help me?"

"I'll help you."

The Winter Watchers went to their cocoons before the Summer people came out from theirs; the mass wakings were automatically controlled. From behind the one-way windows of the Winter annexe, Romie saw it happen. With a subdued but echoing whir the escalators went into action, and within a few minutes the first of the Summer people were pouring out on to the upper levels—the first of fourteen million.

Romie knew the figures, but the fact made his head reel. Ten thousand a minute, six-hundred thousand an hour—in less than twenty-four hours the Summer cocoons would be empty, and the Summer people scattered into the workaday harvest world.

He watched them for some time, marvelling at their noisiness, the inane cheerfulness of their expressions, most of all at the sheer magnitude of their numbers. To begin with he was fascinated, then bored, then a little disgusted. He had to remind himself that these were Jill's people and that if his plans matured, they would be his. He would take on a Summer identity. For him, too, winter would be the time of sleeping.

Jill came in through a side door. She said, "All's well. I should think it would be safer for you to go out now and mix

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with the crowd. Your cocoon is officially ranked as vacant. And I've been able to get an apartment for you. It's in Lakeside, just across the road from mine. It's quite a nice room—I've seen it."

"Room. How big is it, anyway?"

"It has a shower and kitchenette." She smiled. "I see. Where do you usually live?"

"Court Central—on the top floor."

She shook her head. "You Winter millionaires! Living-space is precious to us."

"You said I'd be rich. Can't I buy a bigger place?"

"I wouldn't. You're not rich enough for that. And besides, you don't want to be conspicuous. Here's your key. I'll come to see you tomorrow when I'm off duty."

She kissed him lightly, and went away.

Romie looked after her for a moment, and then went out to join the teeming throng . . .

"Well?" she said.

He moved to one side to let her enter the tiny bed-sitting-room which made up the bulk of his new home.

He said with conviction, "It's good to see you."

"How has it been?" Seeing him hesitate, she went on, "You're looking wintry again."

He made an effort to smile. "Nothing much. A bit of a headache. I didn't sleep too well."

"What was wrong?"

"The noise . . ." He shook his head in bewilderment. "It went on till past three o'clock, and by that time—"

"There are a lot of people here." She looked at him sympathetically. "You'll have to get used to that."

"But surely they could do something about it?"

"Summer people don't mind noise. In fact, they like it. Have you had something to eat?"

Romie shook his head again.

"Why not?"

"I wasn't very hungry. I went down to the restaurant, but—I don't know. All those people eating together. We don't often eat together, even in families."

"It's bound to be a shock at first. Don't worry, darling. You'll adjust to it."

It was the first time she had called him darling. He put out his hand and she took it with her own.

"If you help me," he said.

Three weeks later, Jill managed to get a week's leave and they went to Venice together.

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For Romie it was all new—the stratoplane that took them to Milan, and then the monorail that ran eastwards along the valley of the Po. None of these mass-transport devices was in use during winter, he explained to Jill; everyone had his own 'copter and a choice of cars.

She sighed. "It sounds wonderful."

The monorail carriage was as crowded as Italian means of transport have been since Roman times. In a cheerful babel of noise, passengers drank coffee, peeled oranges, fed babies at the breast.

Although the gauze blinds were down, it was oppressively hot. Opposite them a spade-bearded rabbi expertly twirled spaghetti, washing it down with draughts of Chianti. Television screens flickered at intervals along the central arch. At the far end, someone sang in a throaty tenor voice.

He had thought that things would get easier, but instead they grew harder. The impact of his fellow human beings in the mass was like the constant twisting of a nerve centre which never dulled into mere discomfort. He tried to tell himself how unreasonable it was, but that was no good. A child ran shrieking along the aisle, and he had to clench his nails into the palms of his hands.

They reached Venice at last, registered at their hotel, and took a gondola to St. Mark's. The Grand Canal was black with small craft. A funeral barge floated by, with a sound of wailing. All the boats were antiques; there was no room here for skimmers to manœuvre.

They landed and walked through a thickening crowd to the Piazza. Cathedral and campanile drowsed in the sun.

Jill said, "It's far lovelier than I had imagined. The softness of the air—"

He said, almost vehemently, "You haven't seen it in winter! The bare outlines of the buildings, the sharp sky—the peace and quietness of it."

"Yes, I suppose so. Let's sit here and watch the pigeons."

"When I came," Romie said, "I was by myself. I put my 'copter down—there. Nothing moved. The sun was in the west, big and red. And suddenly a whole cloud of birds drifted in across the waters and settled near me."

"Romie, darling," she said, "are you unhappy?"

He looked at the eddying mass all round them.

"Without you I should be," he said. "As it is . . ."

Summer hammered on. Early in September they had a few days at Biarritz. The great Atlantic breakers swelled in towards sands on which people huddled together under beach umbrellas.

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The noise of the sea was almost inaudible beneath the clamour of portable radios and recorders and TV sets, and the continuous ape-like prattle of the holidaymakers.

Jill asked, "Would you rather go for a walk up in the hills? I hadn't realised it would be quite so bad here."

He leaned towards her. The sound and presence of the crowd gave them privacy. "I want to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"Will you come with me?"

The words were imprecise, but the way they were spoken supplied the meaning. She looked at him seriously.

"Into winter?"

"Yes. Into winter."

"It will be more difficult, won't it?"

"A little, perhaps. But it can be done. There aren't any crowds to hide in, but there's an empty world. In some ways it's easier. Will you?"

"Yes. I will."

He said exultantly, "All the things I can show you—that we can do together. Just wait and see."

Snow fell early that year in Austria, and he took her up into the mountains for ski-ing. They stayed in a deserted hotel, with a white spur looming above them and a deep blue sky over that. She had never cooked for herself, so he taught her. Their feet echoed in the empty rooms and corridors.

They clambered up the slope, and stared round them before ski-ing down.

"Look!" he said.

She looked. There was an empty valley; trackless snow, on which nothing moved but an old raven. She shivered slightly.

"Cold? We mustn't hang about. Race you down to the hotel."

She smiled and nodded, and he started off. For a few moments she watched him go, diminishing away from her, and then, with almost frantic haste, propelled herself after him . . .

They wandered through Vienna, Rome, Geneva, Paris. The cities were theirs and theirs only. Once they saw another 'copter, and once a car speeding from Geneva towards the Swiss dormitory.

But they remained alone, unobserved, untrammelled.

In the Louvre, in front of a dreamlike sunset by Claude of Lorraine, Jill said, "It's strange. In summer there are guards all over the place. And now—what would happen if you took a painting?"

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"Why should one? They are here whenever we want to look at them."

"Or damaged one? Drew a beard on that Rubens Venus?"

He looked shocked for a moment; then he smiled.

"I suppose we're conditioned against it. After all, we are the guardians. We learn very early to wipe our feet on the mat and not to drop cigarette ash."

She said restlessly, "Of course. It's a very civilised way to behave. But you take food and things."

"We always leave a chit. The government pays. Just because we can take what we want, we take only what we need. You understand?"

"Yes. I think so. It's different for someone like me. The summer world doesn't give one the chance to be foolish and extravagant. So one wants to."

Romie smiled. "What particular excess have you in mind?"

"Oh, anything—bathing in champagne!"

He put his hand on her arm. "Back to the hotel, then," he said, "and I'll run you a bath."

"And leave a chit for three dozen magnums?"

"Of course. There are no limits."

She shook her head. "Never mind. It would be cold. And probably flat."

When he had to report back for duty, he found her a penthouse apartment and settled her in with provisions, books, music, and TV tapes.

"It won't be too bad," he told her. "I only have duty every other day, and only for four hours. The rest of the time we can be together. You will be all right, won't you?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll be all right."

But he worried over her while he was away, and over the drawn look in her face when he returned. He devised things to distract and entertain her: dancing to recorded music at the Ritz, swimming in the vast, deserted Empire Pool, exploring the quaint corners of the City, where not even a rat stirred. In clubs in Pall Mall they turned the pages of the year's last issues of the daily papers—copies that would stay there, yellowing at the edges, until the world came to life again, and with it Fleet Street and the presses. In the Houses of Parliament they sat together in the Speaker's chair, and watched the dust settling on the opposing empty benches.

Then, one day he was detained half an hour on duty. He gunned his car at speeds close to a hundred along the silent streets. But when he reached her, she was weeping hopelessly.

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He tried to comfort her. "It was less than half an hour. Jill, darling, I'm here now. Nothing's wrong."

She said, "I thought something had happened to you—that I'd been left alone in this horrible, empty world."

"Nothing's wrong," he repeated. "You're all right now."

She stared at him. "The silence, the loneliness. I can't bear it, Romie. I just can't bear it. Even when you're with me, it frightens me. And by myself—I think that in another five minutes I should have been screaming."

"The music," he said, "the tapes—"

"They make it worse. Knowing that there's no one within miles—that all the sounds and sights are synthetic, unreal. Darling, I've tried. But I can't go on."

He said, faintly hoping, "If I went to the Chief and told him everything—if he got a special dispensation and admitted you as one of the Winter people—you wouldn't be so lonely."

She shook her head. "There would still be this empty world."

He recognised the finality of the decision. With a touch of bitterness, he said, "Then love doesn't cast out fear—not quite."

Her eyes appealed to him. She said only, "Could you live in summer?"

When he turned away from the cocoon he noticed that there was someone in the room with him. His father. He must have witnessed the sealing.

"All right," Romie said. "You know. She helped me to stay through summer and then stayed with me in winter."

His father came over to him, and looked at the cocoon. "She's beautiful. But the loneliness was too much for her?"

"Yes."

"She lasted longer than most do, anyhow."

He was startled. "Then it's happened before?"

His father nodded. "Mostly for the same reasons. Sometimes out of curiosity. I tried a summer when I was your age. I came back to the annexe after a month, with my tail between my legs."

"What punishment did you get?"

His father smiled. "None."

"But the regulations . . ."

"The regulations were made before we became two races. Now they don't matter. Have you ever thought about sleep?"

"What about it?"

"It's not a biological necessity. Some creatures became diurnal, others nocturnal. In prehistory, adaptation to one environment inhibited activity in the other. The only thing to

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do was get out of the way and sleep until the sun came up—or the moon.

"That's what happened with us, only on a larger scale. More than four generations have been hibernating half the year. An individual can no more break the pattern than he can break the habit of sleep."

Romie looked at the motionless girl in the cocoon. "Then we live in different worlds."

"We have no choice."

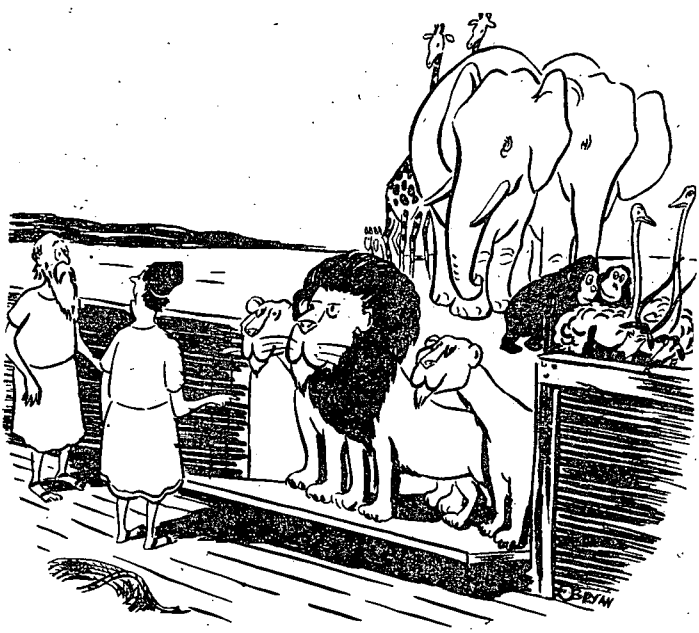
Romie straightened up. "I'd better report to the Chief, I suppose," he said. "Even though there's no punishment."

"He knows," his father said. He nodded towards the cocoon. "Stay with her for a while."

He left him in the room.

Romie gazed through the transparent shield. Jill slept on—beautiful, contented, and at peace.

"All my life," he whispered. © John Christopher 1959



"Hey, Noah, what's the rule on this?"

Drawing by O'Brian

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Comming to kisse her lyps (such grace I found)
Me seemd I smelt a gardin of sweet flowres

EDMUND SPENSER

Innocent breasts, when I have looked upon them,
Would that my hands were there,
How have I craved, and dreaming thus upon them,
Love wakened from despair.
Beauty on her lips flaming,
Rose red with her shaming,
And I with passion burning
And with my whole heart yearning
For her mouth, her mouth, her mouth,
That on her beauty I might slake my drouth.

MS. of Benedictbeuern

Gardenia

Mariette who needed no asking, sat on Mr. Charlton's lap. The illusion of being caressed in a silken, sinuous, maddening way by the goose's neck returned to Mr. Charlton as he felt her silken legs cross his own. A sensation that for the second time his blood was turning white, while being at the same time on fire, coursed completely through him.

The soles of his feet started tingling. The scent of gardenia overwhelmed him like a drug.

" Tell me what that scent is," Mr. Charlton said.

" Gardenia."

" Gardenia? Gardenia? What's gardenia? "

" It's a flower. Do you like it? "

" Like it? Like it? " Mr. Charlton said madly. " Like it? "

With extraordinarily soft hands Mariette took his own and held them high round her waist, just beneath her breasts. With stupefying tenderness she started to rock backwards and forwards on his knee, with the result that Mr. Charlton could not see

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straight. His eyes were simply two quivering balls revolving unrestrainedly in the top of his head . . .

Mariette held his hands more closely against her body and a little higher than before, and Mr. Charlton let his head rest against the velvety, downy nape of her dark neck.

" You're my goose, my gardenia," he said.

" Wouldn't you think," Mariette said, " that it was soon time to go to bed? "

H. E. BATES, *The Darling Buds of May*

Rose Red . . .

My lady's presence makes the roses red,
Because to see her lips they blush for shame.
The lily's leaves for envy, pale became,
And her white hands in them this envy bred.
The marigold the leaves abroad did spread,
Because the sun's and her power is the same.
The violet of purple colour came,
Dyed in the blood she made my heart to shed.
In brief all flowers from her their virtue take.

HENRY CONSTABLE, *Diana*, 1594

Crab Apple

A crab-apple tree blossomed up among the blue.

" You may get me a bit of that blossom," said she, and suddenly added—" no, I can reach it myself," whereupon she stretched upward and pulled several sprigs of the pink and white, and put it in her dress.

" Isn't it pretty? " she said, and she began to laugh ironically, pointing to the flowers—" pretty, pink-cheeked petals, and stamens like yellow hair, and buds like lips promising something nice "—she stopped, and looked at him, flickering with a smile. Then she pointed to the ovary beneath the flower, and said: " Result: crab-apples! "

She continued to look at him, and to smile.

D. H. LAWRENCE, *The White Peacock*

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Bean-Feast

My love is as sweet as a beanfield in blossom;
Like the peabloom her cheek, like the dogrose her bosom:
My love, she's as rich as brook banks of daisies,
Gold eyes and silver rims meeting men's praises;
Her eyes are as bright as the brook's silver ripples,
Milk white are her twin breasts and rose pink the nipples:
Her ankles are sweet as a man can conceive,
And her arms are as fine too though hid in her sleeve.
We met where the beanfields were misted wi' dew,
And if she had kissed me why nobody knew.

JOHN CLARE, *c.*1840

Carpet of Flowers

I felt he was kissing my neck and my cheeks and I was filled with joy, because he never did this. I opened my eyes, my head was turned sideways, one cheek rubbed against the rough wool of the carpet and I could see a wide stretch of wax-polished mosaic flooring beyond the carpet and the lower part of the double folding-doors beyond that. I heaved a deep sigh and closed my eyes again.

Mino was the first to get up; I stayed for some time as he had left me, flat on my back with one arm over my face, my dress disordered, my legs apart. I felt happy and blank in my happiness, and I imagined I could have stayed there for hours, feeling the pleasant hardness of the floor under me, and the smell of dust and fluff in my nostrils. Perhaps I even dropped off into a light, rapid sleep for a second, and I seemed to be dreaming that I really was in a flowery meadow, stretched out on the grass with the sunny sky over me . . .

ALBERTO MORAVIA, *The Woman of Rome*

Daisy Chain

Look how that pretty modest columbine
Hangs down its head to view those feet of thine!
The knot grass and the daisies catch thy toes,
To kiss my fair one's feet before she goes.

NATHANIEL HOOKES, *Amanda*, 1653

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DEAR DECOY

There remained the possibility of another man

BY NICHOLAS MONSARRAT

"I WILL never divorce you, James," declared Marjorie Howgill. It was somehow symptomatic of their entire marriage, thought James Howgill morosely, that even this sentence of hers, which should have been full of flashing fire and determination, only sounded flat and dull. Marjorie, he believed, could have made a list of the Seven Deadly Sins sound like a gardening catalogue.

They sat opposite each other in the comfortable, rather prim, wholly domestic, London house. The radio played innocuous dance music on a waltz-time theme; the cat purred by the hearth; outside, a slight drizzle fell on the tidy pavements of a tidy Chelsea square. It had been like this for a full ten years, he reflected: their ideal marriage had turned into a Darby-and-Joan affair at least a quarter of a century before its time.

Now, as he had told her, he wanted to be free of it: not for any special reason—there was no other woman, in any serious sense—but simply because his excess of boredom had made that freedom essential.

If he were not married to Marjorie, he thought—Marjorie who had changed from demure bride to sober matron in the course of a few months, and had stayed like that ever since—if he were not married to Marjorie, he might be able to take a second chance with someone else before it was too late. After all, he was only thirty-five. But if he didn't make the break soon—

Her voice interrupted him. "Are you really telling me the truth, James?" she asked. "Is there another woman?"

He hitched his shoulders irritably. "No. I've told you."

"Why all this nonsense, then?"

Nonsense, he thought. What a word for his seething discontent! "I just want to be free, that's all. It's so desperately dull like this. We don't mean anything to each other any more."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said his wife.

"Well, *I* say it!" he snapped, with increased irritation. He looked across at her. Even at a moment like this, she was so

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damned *reposed.* Pretty, of course, but dull, dull, dull. They hadn't exchanged a word, beyond the ordinary civilities, for years; and as for romance. "There's nothing left of our marriage, and you know it," he went on.

"What you really need is a good holiday," she said sensibly.

"I don't need a good holiday, or any other kind of holiday!" he almost shouted. He was especially annoyed, because Marjorie was not the only person who had said this to him lately: his doctor, called in to treat a recurrent asthma attack, had produced the same idea; so had one of the old fools at the office. Just like a lot of blasted parrots.

"I need to be *free*, that's all!" he said with absurd emphasis. "And I'm going to be."

"I will never divorce you," she repeated. "I don't believe in it."

"We'll see about that. I'm leaving you, anyway."

"Leaving?" she echoed in dismay. With perverse pleasure, he noted that it was her first sign of excitement for as long as he could remember. "But where will you go?"

"A hotel—anywhere!" He was standing up now, the very picture of a man driven to desperate determination. "I just can't stand this sort of life any longer. Both of us are just mouldering away to nothing. I'm not going to have it like this for the rest of my life."

"But you can't simply take off into the blue."

"Just watch me!"

"James," she said solemnly, "I meant what I said. Whatever you do, I won't divorce you. As far as I'm concerned, we're married, and that's that."

"We'll see. I'm going now."

But Marjorie Howgill had the last word—the most annoying last word any wife could have devised.

"Then I'll pack for you," she said.

James Howgill took his holiday; it seemed the simplest way of initiating the break. He went for three weeks to a small hotel on one of the Italian lakes, where the food was wonderful, the sun a blessing, and his sense of freedom positively rapturous. He had never felt so young nor been so happy, in ten long years.

He enjoyed a brief romance with a French girl who approached the whole thing on such a matter-of-fact yet generous basis that only a boor or a fool could have remained aloof. There was nothing to it, of course; they were simply ships passing, not too hurriedly, in the night. But it was an augury for the future which he cherished.

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Life, for James Howgill, was not yet over.

When he returned to London, he settled down in a small service flat near Jermyn Street. There was no word from Marjorie, and he did not attempt to make contact, even indirectly; he was seeking to show her that his determination was as strong as ever, that he proposed to live alone for as long as he cared to, and that their marriage—divorce or no divorce—was over.

But presently, as the months went by, the situation began to irk him. Their friends had accepted the break with twentieth-century tolerance; and it seemed to have been established, without undue embarrassment, that the Howgills had decided to separate. But it was still less than satisfactory.

This was not the sort of freedom he wanted. He was married, and yet he was not married. If any chances came his way, he was still not free to make the most of them. The wonderful sense of liberation he had experienced in Italy had degenerated into a drab, somewhat dubious, marital twilight.

By and by, grown impatient, he went to call on the firm of solicitors who had handled his affairs for fifteen years. They were not exactly go-ahead, but they might have some ideas. It was ideas he needed—ideas, and then action . . .

Mr. Johnstone, senior partner of Seymour, Johnstone, Cripps, & Knatchbull, received him with the deference due to a medium-rich stockbroker, and the reserve natural in a man-of-law whose speciality was property management. Though he knew James Howgill's domestic situation from hearsay, he had been hoping that it would not be necessary for his firm to take an official hand in it. Seymour, Johnstone, Cripps, & Knatchbull did not greatly care for divorce: indeed, in the time of Seymour, the word itself had scarcely been permissible.

When James Howgill had told him what he had in mind, " My dear Howgill," said Mr. Johnstone, " you astonish me." He did not look astonished, merely attentive in a portly sort of way; but it was enough. " You say there is no possibility of a reconciliation? "

" None whatever," replied James Howgill firmly.

" Perhaps you have—ah—other personal plans? " inquired Mr. Johnstone delicately.

" Not at the moment," said James Howgill. " But, of course, I might have later on. Just now, I simply want to be free. That's all."

" Ah, freedom," intoned Mr. Johnstone, looking as though he would like to make a rather long speech about it. But he collected himself in time. " And Mrs. Howgill—you say she will not take any action herself? In any circumstances? "

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"So she said. And I believe her."

Fingertips together, lips pursed, Mr. Johnstone considered the matter. "Then, if you are so determined, you must initiate divorce proceedings yourself," he said finally. "Let us review the possible grounds of such an action. Mental or physical cruelty?"

James Howgill shook his head. "No. She's not like that."

"Desertion?"

"I don't see how we could make it stick."

Mr. Johnstone frowned at the slang phrase. "Make it stick? Ah—quite so. Let us agree that the desertion, if any, is on your side. There remains—" and here he gathered himself together, impelled to face crude reality—"the possibility of another man."

James Howgill shook his head again. "No. She's not like that, either."

"You are certain?"

"As certain as anyone could be."

"Women unaccustomed to living alone sometimes—" began Mr. Johnstone, and then coughed. "We must take steps to find out," he concluded finally.

"How do you mean?"

Mr. Johnstone leaned forward. If it were possible for so benign a man to look conspiratorial, he did so now. "We must have her watched," he declared firmly.

"Detectives?" asked James Howgill, slightly appalled.

Mr. Johnstone raised an admonitory hand. "Private inquiry agents. Of the most discreet kind. It happens that I know the very firm. I will see that they get in touch with you."

The private inquiry agents, of the most discreet kind, resolved themselves, three days later, into a man with the especially discreet name of Bates. Bates did not look like a detective: indeed, he did not look like anything. He was small, grey, invincibly ordinary; he did not even wear a bowler hat.

One could not have picked him out in a crowd, thought James Howgill, looking at him with curiosity; in fact, one could scarcely have picked him out in an empty room.

For some reason Howgill found this anonymity comforting; he had been feeling slightly guilty at the idea of employing detectives to watch his wife, but this man somehow excused the whole idea. Hoping for limited liability, he had got it in Bates, most limited liability of all.

The two of them settled, with reasonable briskness, the necessary details which Bates must have in order to begin his vigil; Marjorie's address; her appearance—James Howgill

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produced a year-old snapshot; her known habits—very few; her principal friends.

Then Bates folded away the slip of paper on which he had taken his notes, and stood up. "Leave it to us, Mr. Howgill," he said. "If she's playing you up, we'll find out."

James Howgill did not care for the phrase at all. "It's very unlikely—" he began stiffly.

"Human nature," said Bates, not hearing him. "You think you've seen it all, and then you suddenly get a thumb right in the eye . . . What coverage do you want?"

"I beg your pardon?" said James Howgill, taken aback.

"One man can't work all the way round the clock," said Bates. Somehow, discussing terms and, presumably, money, he had taken on a certain measure of authority. "That's human nature of another sort. Over the years we've worked out the best way. It takes three men, in three watches; 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., 4 p.m. to midnight, midnight to 8 a.m."

"Something like the Navy," said James Howgill.

"No doubt. Do you want them all?"

"I hardly think that will be necessary."

"Two out of the three, then?"

"Well—yes."

"Which do you want to leave out?"

James Howgill felt uncomfortable. "The night-time one," he said at length. "I don't think—"

Bates appeared surprised. "Very promising watch, the midnight to 8 a.m.," he said. "If there's any real funny business—"

James Howgill felt a sudden need to end the conversation. "To start with, I'd prefer to leave out the night-time watch," he said firmly. "The other two will be quite enough."

Bates shrugged. "Suit yourself." He prepared to take his final leave. "You won't see me again," he said, surprisingly. "After this, only written reports. Once a day, delivered by hand. In the case of emergency one of my associates will telephone. In case of special emergency *I* will telephone."

"Very well," said James Howgill.

"Terms," said Bates, his authority now coming to a sharp head. "Five pounds per watch per day. Payable in advance."

"Very well," said James Howgill.

"Expenses extra."

"Very well."

"Photographs by arrangement."

For two days, during which James Howgill endeavoured to suppress his guilty feeling that what he was doing was not

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cricket, nor indeed any other game he would care to be caught playing, the reports from Bates were dull—as dull, indeed, as Howgill had expected them to be:

REPORT NO. 1. Made visual contact with subject, established residence, etc.

REPORT NO. 2. Subject shopped Regent Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly; all female wearing-apparel. Subject then partook lunch unescorted at Buttery.

Even apart from the atrocious phraseology, it was not a particularly good twenty pounds' worth, save from the moral aspect; and James Howgill, given a few more such innocuous days, might well have called the whole thing off there and then. But only those first two reports were innocuous.

The third report was narrative in style, and longer.

Subject was called for at own residence by an unidentified male escort at 6.20 p.m. They emerged at 7 p.m. They seemed on good terms with each other. Subject was laughing frequently. Followed taxi to Saroy Hotel, where subject and escort partook three martinis each, plus sandwiches. They then went to a theatre in the Haymarket, sitting in the stalls, fourth row. They emerged at 11.10 p.m., and took taxi to a nightclub—superior supper-and-dance place in Clarges Street.

Watch ceased at midnight in accordance with your instructions, by which time subject had not reappeared.

James Howgill read this through a second time, very carefully, with an odd feeling of depression. All sorts of phrases in it started promising trends of thought; and yet his prime feeling was one of disappointment. How very unlike Marjorie it was!

"Male escort." "On good terms with each other." "Three martinis." "Supper-and-dance club in Clarges Street." It could be construed as the road to ruin itself. And she had actually stayed out after midnight. That was something which hadn't happened for a very long time.

But apparently it was something he would have to get used to; for the fourth report gave him a great deal more to think about.

Subject emerged from residence at 12.10 p.m. Took taxi to hotel, and lunched with male escort of previous night. Subsequently visited cinema in Leicester Square. Sat back row of balcony. Could be observed holding hands.

Subject returned home 5.45 p.m., reappeared at 7.30 p.m. in evening attire. Took taxi to Barchester Hotel.

Met in foyer by male escort—not same as previous—whom she greeted as Darling. They proceeded to Suite

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807 on eighth floor. Dinner for two served at 9.0 p.m.—lobster, champagne, other courses.

Discontinued watch at midnight, as arranged.

NOTE: Escorts will henceforth be identified as No. 1, No. 2, etc. No. 1 is medium build, conservative dress, military bearing. No. 2 identified from hotel register as Jack Carpenter, American citizen, New York.

While James Howgill was reading this, with feelings so mixed that he could not have classified any of them, his office phone rang. It was a man's voice, low-pitched, authoritative.

"Mr. Howgill?"

"Yes?"

"I have a message for you from Mr. Bates."

"Who?" asked James Howgill, confused by the conspiratorial tone.

"Mr. Bates."

"Oh yes. The—"

"Quite so," interrupted the voice swiftly. "The message is as follows. Bearing in mind the reports on the matter we have in hand, do you wish to increase coverage?"

"Well, I don't know," answered James Howgill. And in truth, he did not. The last report was astonishing; he was once again sorry that he had put the thing in hand, but his reasons were now very different. His wife? Holding hands in cinemas? Champagne suppers with Americans lasting half the night? She must be out of her mind!

Wishing to gain time, he said, "Are you—er—one of the—" how did one say it?—"the people involved?"

"That is so," answered the voice, extremely cagily.

"Which one?"

"You mean, the time of day?"

"Yes."

"I cease operations at midnight," said the voice.

"And you really think—"

"It is Mr. Bates' view that we shall not bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion unless we cover the remainder of the twenty-four hour period."

"Very well," said James Howgill after a pause, unhappily. "Let's do that."

"I may say that Mr. Bates is extremely optimistic," concluded the voice, and rang off . . .

If Mr. Bates was optimistic, James Howgill was not. He was, in fact, vilely depressed. It was really too bad of Marjorie to behave like this. She had never done so with him; indeed, the

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most defeating aspect of their marriage had been that she never wanted to go anywhere, and was content to sit placidly at home from one end of the year to the other. But now, without him, she seemed to have gone off the rails completely.

Twinges of jealousy, unknown for ten years, assailed him. How dare Escort No. 1, "of military bearing," hold her hand in a darkened cinema? How dare Jack Carpenter, American citizen, ply her with lobsters and champagne up till midnight and beyond? Dash it all, she was a respectable married woman!

But there was worse to come.

REPORT NO. 5. Flowers were delivered to subject's residence at 10 a.m. They appeared to be roses. Subject partook of lunch with male escort No. 1 at Zoological Gardens restaurant. Escort appeared in bad temper, subsequently quarrelled outside Reptile House, and walked away.

Subject returned home, later emerged, and drove to Barchester Hotel, where she dined in grill room with male escort No. 2—Carpenter.

Subject partook of wine, and was overheard to say, "I am bored," to which Carpenter replied, "Lucio ——'s (name not clear) plane is due at one o'clock. Let us meet it." Subject said, "My goodness, do you know him?" and Carpenter replied, "We have been buddies since Hoover was a boy."

At twelve midnight they summoned taxi and told driver to go to Heathrow airport. I reported this to my relief, who followed them thereto and will doubtless give details later. As they drove off, subject inquired, "Is he really as devastating as they say?" Reply was inaudible.

James Howgill was digesting this, with increasing dismay, when his telephone rang. This time it was Mr. Bates himself, his voice positively charged with excitement.

"Mr. Howgill," he said, "I think we're on to something big."

"What do you mean?" asked James Howgill.

"I can't communicate the details over the telephone," said Bates curtly. "But I'm sending a report by special messenger. It should be there any minute."

"Special messenger?" repeated Howgill, in agony. "What is it?"

"You saw the last report?"

"Of course."

"Then you know the subject met a certain party at Heathrow."

"What party?" The ridiculous word seemed to touch a raw nerve.

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" I can't say over the phone," repeated Bates. " But I'll tell you this, Mr. Howgill. That extra coverage was cheap at the price! "

James Howgill tore open the envelope. The first sentence and the name it contained hit him like a monstrous wave.

> Passenger arriving at Heathrow airport was Lucio Ambrosini. Name will be familiar. Subject, escort, and Ambrosini drove off in Rolls-Royce (hired) after animated greeting, press interviews, etc. Prior to departure Ambrosini embraced subject and remarked, " I like you, baby. Let us get this show on the road."
>
> Party drove to Barchester Hotel, where Ambrosini had engaged so-called Presidential Suite, 14th floor. At 3 a.m. party emerged, drove to nightclub, subsequently to Giotti's, Conduit Street, and the Ring of Belles, off Grosvenor Square.
>
> On returning to Barchester Hotel, 6 a.m., Escort No. 2 (Carpenter) said good-bye in foyer, remarking, " I know when I am licked." Subject and Ambrosini proceeded to Presidential Suite, Ambrosini inquiring, " Are you licked yet, baby? " and subject replying, " I have only just started. What is for breakfast? " Ambrosini answered, " Fried Ambrosini." Both laughed. Subject had not emerged from Presidential Suite at 8 a.m.

Lucio Ambrosini. The name itself was enough for a divorce action, thought James Howgill in a fury. Ambrosini had been cited in at least five of them, to the accompaniment of uproarious scandal and maximum headlines on both sides of the Atlantic. He was rich, elegant, much travelled, a household word in far too many households.

He was a true international playboy, though he held some marginal diplomatic post which could not have occupied his time for more than a week in any one year. He drove racing cars into trees, horses into water-jumps, women into transports of delight and floods of tears.

He was Lucio Ambrosini, married three times, the bane of husbands from Capri to Cape Cod. It was said that he only had to look at a woman . . .

James Howgill crumpled up the report, and hurled it into the fireplace. Then he reached for his hat. This ridiculous affair had gone far enough.

James Howgill faced his wife across the sitting-room—his own sitting-room.

" But where have you been? " he asked again. " I've been

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ringing the doorbell here for nearly a week." He tried to make his tone a commanding one, but it came out as a sort of pleading complaint—the way, in fact, that he felt at this moment.

Marjorie was really looking quite beautiful. There had been all those men—and Lucio Ambrosini to top them off. She must have something, after all, and he had never been able to find it until now. His thoughts were confused, while Marjorie, he observed with deep misgiving, was composed and cool.

"I was away, James," she answered. "It was lonely here. I took a little holiday."

"A holiday? Where?"

"I stayed with some friends in Scotland."

"What friends?"

"You don't know them, darling." She smiled. It was difficult to say what sort of a smile it was. It might have been secretive. It might have been shy. It was certainly new—or perhaps he hadn't noticed it before.

"You've been gone such a long time," she went on. "I'm bound to have made a few new friends."

"How long were you away?"

"About six weeks."

He stared at her, full of jealousy, raging with suspicion, yet powerless to make anything of it. He knew she was not telling the truth, yet he could not charge her with it. That would mean confessing about the detectives, and he was deeply ashamed of them, and of a lot of other things.

And if he told her about the detectives she might be angry, and turn him out again. He couldn't stand that. Not now.

"I hope you haven't been too lonely," he said awkwardly.

"Not too lonely. Of course, I've missed you."

Marjorie smiled again, the same smile. It annoyed him, plagued him, and intrigued him. He felt a wave of pure astonishment sweep over him. After all these years, she suddenly intrigued him! Once again he thought, she must have something, in spite of everything.

Looking at her, he knew it was something he had to have, this time for good. She was not the old Marjorie at all. She was new, tantalising, feminine. Above all, she was his, to be defended against all comers. If other men were attracted to her, they'd just have to keep their distance.

On an impulse, he walked over and kissed her. Even her lips felt different now. He found himself swearing that they must belong to him, and to no one else.

"It's nice to be home," he said unsteadily.

Touching his hand, she said, "It *is* a nice house, isn't it?"

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For a moment she wanted to tell him that while she had been away in Scotland, the house—their house—had been let: and to a film actress, of all people. But she decided not to.

James was odd about things like that. And strait-laced, too. He might not understand. And she could not bear to spoil this moment. James was positively ardent. Life had really been very dull without him.

"It's lovely to be back," she said. "Please stay."

"For ever!" he answered determinedly. "Among other reasons, I don't believe you're safe to leave alone."

"Why, James! What do you mean?"

"You know," he said, with possessive warmth. "But let's never mention it again."

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"Get up, Ali, I must change the bedding."

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THE TERRIBLE MRS. BARKER

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

MRS. BARKER, who strode into Inspector Petrella's office one morning, was a tall, upstanding woman with the carriage of a guardsman. Her age was difficult to guess. Her apple-red cheeks belonged either to extreme youth or extreme old age, but from her thick shock of iron-grey hair he judged her to be the wrong side of fifty.

She was followed by Constable Whitty.

"I told her," said Whitty, "she couldn't come in without an appointment."

"That's right, young man." She turned to Petrella. "The name's Barker. Mrs. Barker."

"I told her—"

"You did your duty." Mrs. Barker dismissed him with a backward wave, and thrust out a large, red hand with so compelling a gesture that Petrella found himself shaking it. The grip was every bit as strong as his own.

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"All right, Whitty," he said, "she's got here now. I'd better see her. Sit down, will you?"

Mrs. Barker lowered her weight on to the office chair, which creaked a protest. And as soon as Whitty had closed the door behind him, she turned her light blue eyes on Petrella and said, "I'm being followed."

"I see," said Petrella. "Well, I'd better have your full name and address, then."

"Emmeline Freda Barker," said the woman. "Maiden name, Postgate. Address, 29, Crayborne Street. Six of them."

"Six?"

"Following me," said Mrs. Barker. "Four men and two women. One of the men has lost an ear. There's a bit of it left. It looks as if it's been bitten off."

Petrella got up and moved across to the window. Gabriel Street was not empty, but there was no one in it whose presence he could not account for.

"I don't think they've followed you here," he said.

"They wouldn't be just standing outside. They're too clever for that. Or Bunny may have frightened them away. He gets rid of them for me sometimes."

"Bunny?"

"That's what I call him. He's my boy. Of course, I rely on him a lot. And I've got plenty of friends, too. There's nothing wrong with my disposition."

"Certainly not," said Petrella.

"But Bunny's the only one I can really rely on. I'm afraid he'll find himself a girl some day, and then, of course, he won't be able to look after me. To tell you the honest truth, I sometimes wonder if he isn't a bit soft. I mean, you'd have to be soft to tag around all day after a woman like me, when half the girls you meet would give their eyes for you, now wouldn't you?"

Petrella felt he had to concede that one. Also, he had a lot of work to do, so he reached for the bell under his desk.

"Oh, Wilmot," he said. "This is Mrs. Barker. She has an interesting story to tell us. I'll get her to tell it to you, as I've got to be off now. You can use my room."

He spent the rest of the morning pursuing some inquiries into a case of self-inflicted arson, and had something to eat at a quick-lunch counter with a man who had once been a cat burglar, but had lost his nerve on the roof of a four-storey house, and been rescued by the fire brigade, a blow to his pride which had caused him to abandon crime and become an informer.

At three o'clock he got back to his office and found an indignant Wilmot. Even in uniform Wilmot had never looked much like

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a policeman. In plain clothes, the resemblance to a teddy boy was startling. Nevertheless, Petrella knew that quite a useful brain functioned under that unspeakable haircut.

"How did you get on?" asked Petrella.

"Fine," said Wilmot. "Fine. I've got it all here. Six pages of it."

"How long did it last?"

"An hour and a half, with me," said Wilmot. "Then I was called out. Luckily Sergeant Shoesmith came along then. He's got some more. She's followed round by six of them. Night and day.

"One of them's lost an ear. And another is coffee-coloured, but he's got six golden teeth. They never leave her. But they're crafty. They keep out of sight almost all the time. And when they crowd her too much, she sends her Bunny after them. He's quite a boy, her Bunny. He soon chases 'em away."

Wilmot looked with distaste at the six pages of ink-stained foolscap. He hated writing. "She's cracked, ent she?"

"Yes. Acute persecution mania. Not uncommon."

"If she's cracked, why did you let her waste my morning?"

"I thought it'd be a useful experience for you," said Petrella.

It was a week later that Wilmot said, "I saw our girlfriend again last night."

"You saw who?"

"Ma Barker. She was eating in Dan's Place. That's a joint I use down Water Street. And I'll tell you a funny thing."

"No. Let me guess," said Petrella. "She was sharing a table with a handsome boy called Bunny."

"She was all by herself. I kept away. I didn't want her coming over and telling me a lot more stuff. And when I'd finished, I hung back a bit and let her get off first."

"Very wise," said Petrella. "Most persecution maniacs have a strong mother complex. You'd be meat and drink to her."

"That's not half of it. A minute later another man—I hadn't seen *him* before—he must have been keeping out of sight, too—he got up and went out without paying his bill."

"I bet that upset Dan."

"Dan had seen him, all right. If this boy had been walking out without paying, Dan wouldn't have been upset. He'd have thrown the cash register at him. But I guessed he'd paid his bill before. And that looked like he might have been waiting for Mrs. Barker to move."

Petrella said, "In those places you usually pay when you get your stuff. There's not much in all that."

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"Not taken by itself, there isn't," agreed Wilmot. "The only thing was, I got a look at this boy when he was going out. Coffee-coloured, and a mouthful of gold teeth."

Petrella considered the matter. He did not underrate Wilmot's detective ability, though it was more instinctive than logical. On the other hand, there were thousands of brown men, West Indians, East Indians, Portuguese, Lascars, and all sorts; particularly in the dockside area round Water Street.

And one in three had gold teeth. They seemed to use their mouths as savings banks.

"You'd better keep your eyes open," he said.

But it was Petrella himself who saw her next. He had spent the afternoon and evening talking to the Port and Customs Officers about a case of illegal immigration, and was on his way home when he spotted the figure ahead of him. There was no mistaking the grenadier-like set of the shoulders and the martial stride. As he watched her, she turned in at the door of a café.

Petrella gave her three minutes' start, then went in after her. There was a row of stools at the counter, and Mrs. Barker was planted on one of them. She had ordered herself a mug of coffee and was sitting with her chin in her hands staring at it. Petrella squeezed past, and made for a table near the end of the room.

It was ten minutes before Mrs. Barker stirred a muscle. Then she straightened up on her stool, grasped the mug of coffee and drained it off, slapped some money on the counter, sprang to her feet, and marched out of the door.

It seemed to Petrella that this spasm of sudden action was reflected in a series of smaller, reactionary movements inside the room. A man lowered a paper he had been reading. Another got up and walked to the counter. A third, a tall man who had been occupying the table in the far corner, rose to his feet and strolled towards the entrance. The tall man was putting on his hat as he moved, but this did not conceal the fact that all that remained of his right ear was a ragged fringe.

Petrella folded away his own paper and started to move, too. A minute later he was outside. The street was deserted. He stood and listened.

Away to the left he had no difficulty in picking up the drum-beat of Mrs. Barker's tread. He started to run.

At the end of the road he slowed down so that he could turn the corner without apparent haste. He was wearing rubber-soled shoes, and his method of pursuit was simple but well-tried. You waited until your quarry had turned the corner and then ran after him, trusting to catch up before he could turn another. It

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was an excellent method, provided the streets were all of roughly the same length.

Ferry Street, at the far end of which Mrs. Barker and her shadower were moving, was a cavern of darkness, walled by high warehouses and lit by infrequent lamps. Petrella waited until the two figures were a dim blur at the far end. Then, having much leeway to make up, he started to sprint. He had gone twenty yards when something picked his ankles from under him.

He flew forward through the air, and came down on the unyielding pavement with a force that drove all the air from his body. At the same moment his head cracked up against something hard, and the blackness was prickled with points of light. There was the salt taste of blood in his mouth, and a pounding in his ears.

He got up on to his hands and knees, and let his head hang. Then he realised that the noise he was hearing was not inside his head. The pounding was someone running.

And as the sound grew faint, he realised, thankfully, that they were running away.

Wilmot, who was on divisional night duty at Gabriel Street, tried to conceal his emotions when Petrella arrived.

Petrella said, "You look at me once more like that, Wilmot, and I'll have you booked for insubordination. Get some hot water and the first-aid kit. And I haven't been drinking."

It took ten minutes to make him look roughly presentable. The palms of both hands were raw where he had come down on them, and there was a bruise like a tomato on the side of his head.

"I thought I'd been coshed," he said. "But it wasn't that at all. I hit a fire hydrant when I came down. Luckily not when I was actually diving, but when I was rolling."

"He tripped you?"

"That's right," said Petrella. "As neat a trip as you'd ever see at Highbury or the Valley. I flew through the air with the greatest of ease. It was the landing which was the hard part. If he'd wanted to finish me off he could have done it with one hand. I was out. But he ran away."

"Who do you think it was?"

"I can tell you two things about him," said Petrella. "I can tell you what kind of cigarettes he smokes. I found fag-ends in the doorway where he'd been standing. And he'd been there half an hour at least, because I found a number of them."

Wilmot thought this over in silence. Then he said, "So you think Ma Barker—" and stopped.

"It's not easy to swallow," agreed Petrella. "You thought she was crazy. So did I. But if tonight's anything to go

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by—well, it was a three-man job. Perhaps four. I got the impression there were two of them in the café. And if they had this man posted to pick up the chase, or discourage pursuit—that means three. And since they couldn't know which way she was going, probably a fourth on the other side as well."

"But why?"

"That's what we're going to find out," said Petrella. "We're going to do some work. By which I mean you, not me. I've stuck my neck out too far already. You can have Baldock to help you. Start by getting a candid camera shot of the lady, have it blown up and sent to Central for checking. She might have a record. If not—"

"I know where she lives," said Wilmot. "The woman who keeps the house is a friend of the aunt of the girl I'm going with. She's a great talker."

"Which is?"

"All three of 'em, actually," said Wilmot.

A week had gone, and Petrella was beginning to be able to handle a knife and fork without actual discomfort, before Wilmot reported.

"*She*'s clean," he said. "No record. But that's more than you could say for her old man." He paused with the assurance of an actor who has a good line to speak.

"Her name's not really Barker at all. Do you know what? She's Mrs. Andy Kelling."

"Good God," said Petrella.

His profanity was excusable. For Andrew Kelling had been, in his own way, a remarkable man.

When, as sometimes happened, houses in the Shires, residences of stockbrokers in Surrey, or villas of City magnates on the middle reaches of the Thames were broken into, and the jewel cases of lady guests were swiftly and silently emptied, the newspapers usually made some reference to a "Country House Gang." But the crime reporters suspected, and the police knew, that this was largely eyewash. For Mr. Kelling was a gang unto himself. He was his own Intelligence Service, his own Chief of Staff, his own cracksman, and his own receiver.

He had operated by day a genuine, and indeed profitable, house agency near Staines, and was reputed to have had a proportion of his own gains invested in house property. It was these gains, and their precise whereabouts, which had exercised the minds of the police—and certain large insurance companies—when Mr. Kelling had at last been trapped and had walked off, a silent, grey-faced ghost, to begin a long sentence; a sentence

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which had ended, prematurely, eighteen months later, in the hospital ward at Reading Gaol.

"Yes. I remember he had a wife," said Petrella. "No one thought she had anything to do with his illegal activities. The idea was that he used her as cover. She was part of his respectable background. She didn't know anything."

"It doesn't look as if that's quite right, now," said Wilmot. "At least, the boys don't seem to think so."

"And what do the boys think?"

"It's like this," said Wilmot. "She lives in this house in Crayborne Street, down by the river. She came there about a year ago. It's a sort of boarding house. This Mrs. Williams keeps it."

"Who's a friend of your present girlfriend's aunt."

"That's right," said Wilmot. "And there's no call to say *present*, as if I changed 'em each week. This one's permanent."

"I'm sorry," said Petrella. "Go on."

"Well, every month or so, Ma Barker gets behind with her rent. Mrs. Williams lets her run a bit, then tells her the old story. How she can't wait for her money for ever, and there's plenty of people would jump at the room, and so on, and Ma Barker says, 'All right, you shall have your money. I'm expecting some dividends in a day or two.'

"And in about a week, sure enough, she comes along and pays everything, in pound notes; only the funny thing is—she never seems to get any letters at all."

"I see," said Petrella. "And do the boys follow her round the whole time, or just sometimes? And which boys are they?"

"It's Larry Michaels—he's the one lost an ear. He was in a circus and had it bitten off by a sea-lion. And his wife's in it, too. A big girl. I'm told she was the holder-upper of an all-girl pyramid before she retired. The coffee-coloured boy's called Sam Lazzarone, and there's three or four others. The others came in it with Sam, I guess. He was with the Elephants before they got bust up."

"Yes," said Petrella. He knew enough, now, about south London to realise that these Elephants had no connection with sea-lions and circuses. "Not a very nice crowd."

"And they don't have to watch the whole time, either, because Larry's got a tip-off in the house. An old party on the top floor that Mrs. Williams is sweet on."

"I see," said Petrella. He was silent for a minute, visualising Mrs. Barker, centre of this little net of intrigue; watched by sharp and hungry eyes, waiting for her to lead them to an incalculable prize, nothing more nor less than Andy Kelling's treasure

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house. What would happen when they got there? The Michaels were an unknown quantity, but if Sam had brought in his Elephant and Castle crowd, there was trouble ahead for all of them.

"Does she know she's being watched?"

"That's just what no one's sure about," said Wilmot. "She doesn't give any sign she knows, but maybe she's not so crazy. She could just be dead cunning. Last two or three times, when she's run short of money, she's started house hunting."

"House hunting?"

"That's right. Her old man was a house agent, remember? I expect his buddies know Ma Barker. I expect they think she's a harmless old coot. They give her orders to view. Last time," Wilmot smiled, "she looked at forty-seven different houses—all over the place—some in London, some out of it—forty-seven in three days! And when she'd run 'em right off their feet, she slipped 'em, on the third evening. And next day Mrs. Williams got her money."

Petrella said, "If *they* can't follow her, do you think *we* could?"

"Well, I got an idea about that," said Wilmot. "But I haven't quite worked it out yet."

"Don't do anything silly," said Petrella.

He had useful contacts himself among the men who let and sell houses, and he spent long hours with busy professionals, poring over their lists and learning something of the ways of their trade.

"Most of us know Mrs. Barker," said Sam Tallybeare, who ran five estate agencies under five different names. "And we knew her old man, too, and liked him. Yes, I know he was a crook. So when his missus wants to go on the prowl, we're willing to oblige.

"She might even buy a house some day. You never know. And she's not just a buyer. She could be a seller. She's got at least three houses of her own. Did you know that?"

"I certainly did not," said Petrella slowly.

"It's not a thing many people know about," said Sam. "And I only know because—" He got up, shut the door, and came back and sat down again at his desk. Petrella divined that he was giving himself time to think.

"Could you tell me the names of the houses her husband owned?"

Again Sam Tallybeare hesitated.

"I've a reason for asking," said Petrella. "And if you can keep your mouth shut, I'll tell you the story. Or I'll tell you as much as I know of it. It's a story without an end, as yet."

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When he had finished, Sam waddled across to a filing cabinet, which he unlocked with a key from his own ring.

"In as far as he trusted anyone," he said, "I think Andrew Kelling trusted me. And I'm breaking the rule of a lifetime in giving away what was a professional confidence. However, there's a time for everything. Even for breaking rules. Here you are. Andy owned three houses at least. One near Heston—when the airport was built, there were a lot of big houses going at knock-down prices. Another's at Chertsey, and the third's at Egham. The first two are pretty useless, in bad repair, and too big, anyway. The Egham one's different. It's actually on the river. I've had a lot of people asking for that. The old woman won't sell."

"Then they're hers?"

"That's right. He left her everything."

Petrella took further particulars of the three houses and went back to Gabriel Street. He found Wilmot waiting for him.

"I think I've got something," he said. "I told you I had an idea. Well, what it was, my girl's got a bit pally with Ma Barker. Linda says she's not really crazy. Not all the time. She talks a bit funny, about Bunny—"

"Just who *is* Bunny?"

"He's her son. The only one they had. He died when he was a kid. But she never believed he was dead, see? As far as she was concerned, he just went straight on growing up. Sometimes she talks about him to Linda. Tells her what he did in the war. He was a sergeant rear-gunner. And about how well he's doing now—runs a garage of his own. And how popular he is with the girls."

"He seems to be quite a boy."

"He's all that," said Wilmot. "She told Linda, the other day, that she ought to hurry up and marry him."

"Doesn't she know Linda's engaged to you?"

"She knows that," said Wilmot, "but sometimes I think she thinks I'm Bunny—sounds mad, doesn't it?"

"Not at all," said Petrella. "She goes for Linda. Linda's the sort of girl she'd like her Bunny to marry. Linda's going to marry *you*, so *you're* Bunny. That part's easy."

Wilmot shook his head. "She's certainly fond of Linda. She wants to give her a present. Linda once said something to her about a scarf pin, and now the old girl comes out and says, 'I'll buy you one.' Linda tried to ride her off. She didn't want to take anything off her. Then this morning, she said to Linda, 'I'm taking you out shopping next Wednesday afternoon. See you keep it free.' *Next Wednesday afternoon.* Quite definite."

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"That fits nicely," said Petrella. "We're Thursday now. That means she'll probably start going places over the weekend. But that'll be camouflage. She doesn't really plan to go near her cache until—say—Monday. All right? We'll let Larry and his boys get the run around first. Then we'll step in at the finish. And I'll tell you something else. When we do get to the finish, it'll turn out to be Heston, Chertsey, or Egham."

Wilmot stared at him.

"I've been working on this, too," said Petrella coldly.

It turned out to be Egham.

The house stood outside the town at the end of a lane, which is a parking place for picnickers' cars in summertime, but in early spring was nothing but a deserted avenue of dripping poplars bounded on one side by wasteland where the swans nested, and on the other by three large properties, all with their own river frontages. Mrs. Barker's "Green Leas" was the one which lay farthest from the main road; and a bend in the lane hid it even from its neighbour.

"Lovely place for a murder," said Wilmot. He and Petrella, shivering in their raincoats, were occupying a more or less dry ditch on the landward side of the property. They had been there for nearly two hours.

During this time they had seen Mrs. Barker leave the house twice and make her way down to a large boathouse on the river's edge. She had come back, on the second occasion, with an armful of wood; and a trickle of white smoke from the chimney had indicated that she, at least, was contriving to keep warm.

Now that dusk had fallen, a single light twinkled from one of the front windows. The electricity must have been cut off, and Petrella diagnosed a hurricane lamp.

"She making a night of it?" said Wilmot.

"If she does, we do," said Petrella between clenched teeth. "See if you can get a quick look at that boathouse before it's too dark. Go along the ditch and you'll probably find a wooden landing stage; most of these riverside gardens have them. Keep your nose well down and no one will see you."

Wilmot crawled off, glad of the excuse to move. He was away half an hour.

"It's quite a place," he reported.

"Keep your voice down."

"She can't hear us."

"It's not Mrs. Barker I'm thinking about," said Petrella, his mouth close to Wilmot's ear. "The opposition's arrived. Three of them, in a van. One's sitting in it, up the track. The

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other two are in the bushes, over on the other side. Now go on, but very quietly."

"It's a sort of boatshed *and* dry dock," said Wilmot. "I got in a window at the back. It's two levels—a basement and a ground floor, and it's big enough for a motor launch. The bottom part's dry now, like an empty swimming bath, with planks over it, if you follow me."

"I think so," said Petrella. "They'd float the boat in, then shut off the side next to the river, and pump the water out. Did you see anything that looked like a hiding-place?"

"There was a lot of wood in the passage. And some steps down and a sort of iron door, like in a ship."

"A bulkhead?"

"That's right. I couldn't open that. Then I looked in the upstairs part. That was empty. Just wooden walls and loose planks over the dock part to stop you falling in. I could have got them up, I expect, but it would have taken a bit of time."

Petrella considered, shifting slowly from one numb foot to the other. It sounded like the makings of a nice hiding-place. Supposing you made your cache actually at the bottom of the dry dock. *If a search was threatened, all you'd have to do would be to turn a handle and let the river back in.* Who would think of looking under six feet of water?

He explained his ideas to Wilmot, who said, "What do we do? Go and look?"

"What we do," said Petrella, "is wait. Wait right here and see what happens."

Wilmot groaned softly.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Barker appeared at the front door. She carried a storm lantern in her hand, and came down the steps, and after a moment of hesitation swung round right-handed, and made for the boatshed.

"Come on," said Petrella, and, "ouch," as the sudden movement restored the circulation to his feet. "You lead; you know the way."

He followed Wilmot down the ditch and out on to the wooden jetty. Evening had merged into night, and a pale, cold moon shone down on the water which ran by, fast and silent, inches from their noses as they crawled. It was no summer river, but spring water, dangerous and swollen with melted snow and ice.

Wilmot breathed, "That's the window; I left the catch off. Shall I go in?"

Petrella thought about that. He was loath to split his tiny force, but a man inside might be useful.

"All right," he said, "watch your step."

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Wilmot disappeared with the speed and silence of a cat into a larder, and Petrella settled down again to wait.

The other two men were not so clever at night stalking, and he heard them ten yards off. As they came out into the moonlight he recognised long Larry Michaels, and guessed that the dark shadow with him was Sam Lazzarone. At the door they halted for a moment and listened.

When the noise came, it broke the silence with startling clarity. Someone was hammering.

The noise shook the two men into action. Larry tried the door and found it locked. That won't stop 'em, thought Petrella. Their blood's really up, now. I only hope they don't come round this end looking for a window.

The moonlight glinted on something in Sam's hand; there was a loud click and the door opened. The two men went in. The hammering had ceased.

Petrella got up again from where he had been crouching and applied his eye once more to the window. A torch came on for a moment from low down, and Petrella saw the iron bulkhead door that Wilmot had spoken of. It was ajar.

Wilmot had said that he had tried to open it and failed. That looked as if Mrs. Barker was now inside the dry dock itself, although the sound of hammering had come from higher up.

For some time nothing happened. The next person who came into his view was Wilmot. Wilmot, in that torch flash, had apparently also seen the open bulkhead, and it was clear that curiosity had overcome discretion. He was now inching down the stairs, and soon had his eyes at the opening.

Petrella had stopped calculating; there were too many factors. He had stopped worrying; there was too much to worry about. He almost stopped breathing.

When it happened, it all happened quickly.

From the shadows behind Wilmot arose the avenging form of Mrs. Barker. Wilmot heard her move, jumped to his feet, and swung round. Mrs. Barker hit him a clean, fast, swinging blow under the jaw, and he went down in a heap. Petrella gaped. Wilmot, he knew, had boxed in the professional ring.

Neither pausing nor hurrying, Mrs. Barker stooped, gathered Wilmot by the coat collar in one hand, opened the watertight bulkhead with the other, transferred her second hand to Wilmot, and heaved him through.

Then she shut the bulkhead, stood up, produced a storm lantern, lit it, and stood the lighted lantern on the packing-case behind which she had been hiding. She seemed to be grimly satisfied with her work.

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From inside the dry dock, but muffled by the intervening bulkhead, came the cries and shouts of men. Larry and Sam had tumbled to their predicament and sounded angry. Petrella hoped they weren't taking it out of Wilmot.

It was at this moment, and not before, that he understood what Mrs. Barker was up to. She had stooped, and taken from behind the packing-case a long, iron instrument with a T-shaped handle and a forked end. She inserted this into a square trap, sunk in the concrete floor, and proceeded to twist it.

For a moment there was silence inside the bulkhead. Then cries and shouts on a new note of terror and panic.

And the sound of water.

For an instant, Petrella's legs refused to obey the urgent orders of his brain. Then he had jumped for the door and burst through it into the shed.

Mrs. Barker looked up. Her colourless eyes gave back the yellow of the lantern light which bobbed and flickered in the sudden draught.

"Open that door," said Petrella.

"Why should I?" said Mrs. Barker.

"You're drowning three men."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Barker. "It seemed the best way."

"I can't allow you to do it," said Petrella. He was moving forward, very gently, judging his distance. His eye was on the iron key which Mrs. Barker still held in her powerful right hand.

"Are you *able* to stop me?" she said.

"I'm not sure," said Petrella, "but I'm going to try." On the word "try" he jumped.

He caught the key before it could come up, and wrenched it away. The next moment Mrs. Barker had both arms round him, and they had fallen on to the floor. His face was a few inches from the bottom of the bulkhead. Time had spoilt the watertight fit, and water was beginning to crawl out underneath it.

The cries inside had changed to screams.

He hunched his back, drew his knees under him, and bucked. He might as well have tried to shift a mountain. The deadly truth seized him. Mrs. Barker was stronger than he was. Stronger and heavier; and she meant to hold on, and go on holding on until the dry dock was full of water; a concrete trap, to the top of which she had, with her own hands, nailed the final boards that evening, sealing the last chances of escape.

He twisted, bringing his head round until he could look into her mad eyes. He controlled his breathing until he could speak, and then he said, "You know, don't you, that Bunny is in there with the other men?"

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"It's a lie."

"It's not a lie. That was Bunny that you hit, and threw in. He's probably drowned by now. The other men may escape. They've only got to keep standing. The door's leaking fast, but Bunny will be dead."

He felt her grip slackening. The next moment she was on her feet and fumbling with the iron bolts of the bulkhead door.

The water, which came out in a solid wave, brought Wilmot with it. Petrella got him under the arms, dragged him up the steps and out of the boathouse. Then he turned him on his face and started to work on him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw two figures grappling on the water's edge, heard a shot and a scream; then a splash. He took no notice at all, but worked steadily on.

Petrella said to Benjamin a week later, "That's that. Now we know. There was nothing in any of the houses except booby traps. The boatshed was in some ways the most ingenious of them, but the one at Heston wasn't bad. A trapdoor in the floor with counterweights, and the lower room sealed up, and a lot of inflammable material collected. If she'd caught them in *that* one, she was going to burn them."

"A single-minded woman," said Benjamin, "and the money was in a safe deposit all the time?"

"That's right. Three different safe deposits actually. We found the keys in her room."

"How's Wilmot?"

"He's fine," said Petrella. "That boy will take a lot of killing. The only thing he's scared of is someone finding out about Mrs. Barker knocking him out. He'd never live that down. I had to promise him solemnly that I wouldn't open my mouth."

"If you don't talk about it, no one else can," said Benjamin. There was something in his tone which made Petrella look up.

"It's what I came to tell you," said Benjamin. "They found Mrs. Barker this morning. The Thames Conservancy police pulled her out below Bell Weir lock. Larry Michaels was with her. Her arms were still round his waist. The pathologist couldn't unlock them."

"Nor could I," said Petrella, and shuddered.

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BREAKING THE ICE

Sign in ice-cream shop: Take home a brick. You may have company.

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★ *Ken Hardman, who won a second prize in the recent Seafarers' Education Service competition, says he wrote his first impossible story at the age of ten. Seven years later he joined the Merchant Navy, and found it so congenial that he has stayed in it for fifteen years. Like the singer in Masefield's "All I ask is a tall ship"—from which his title is taken—he wants nothing more than to go on seeing the world from the foc'sle of a tramp steamer.*

ALL I ASK

BY KEN HARDMAN

DEEP down inside his sleeping brain a small germ of reason told him he was dreaming again, but still the wild surge of panic swept over him, twisting his bowels and pricking out beads of sweat on his forehead.

To the slow clanging of the bell his memory fiendishly added other sounds: the shaking thump of torpedoes and the shrieking of broken steam pipes, the clatter of feet along the decks of ships long drowned in the green depths of the sea, and the voices of men who had gone with them raised in pain, in fear, in excitement.

His eyelids snapped back like hastily released window-blinds, and he jumped up in a flurry of bedclothes. The icy cold of the floor beneath his bare feet shocked him into wakefulness, and he sat dazedly on the edge of the bed listening to the brazen notes of the breakfast bell diminishing in the distance.

Blast that bell! He lowered his throbbing head into his hands, feeling the hard stubble on his jaw and the thin, sticky film on his lips. Too much booze again last night—it was always like this after a bellyful of ale.

The urge to sink back again between the warm sheets was almost overpowering; he fought against it, thinking of the day that lay ahead, and feeling the now familiar sinking in the pit of his stomach at the thought of what might happen today.

A bus ground past in the street below, and far out on the river a tug's whistle burst into a series of frantic blasts. The great, unheeding city of Liverpool was stirring sluggishly around the ugly fortress walls of the Sailors' Home and the elderly man who sat dejectedly on the edge of his bed.

With a sudden rush of effort he stood up, thrust his feet into

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an old pair of sandals, and wrapped a towel round his thin loins. A cold shower was what was needed. Shivering a little at the thought of it, he picked up his toilet bag, unlocked the door, and walked on to the echoing gallery.

He paused for a moment at the rail, looking down into the huge, central well of the building. Tiers of balconies ran round the egg-shaped well from floor to roof, each with its cubicles exactly like his own. Like living in a bloody great liftshaft, he thought, grinning a little. He turned and walked briskly towards the showers. The bathroom was warm and empty. He hung up his towel and stepped beneath the shower, gagging deep in his throat as the cold water struck the rich mahogany-brown of his back and coursed swiftly down over the dead-white buttocks, which had been shielded by his shorts from countless days of burning tropical sun, on to his equally brown, hairy legs.

Furtively he turned the handle over to HOT, and relaxed in the soothing, steamy warmth of the water. Already he felt better. And as he shaved he regarded his leathery-skinned image in the mirror with something like satisfaction. Pass for fifty any day, he thought, looking deep into the clear blue eyes, and grinning savagely at the strong, brownish teeth. If only I had a bit more hair—he drew his hand along the broad, bald path dividing his strands of iron-grey, leaving a trail of shaving-soap from his fingers like a white cocks-comb. He smiled at the effect. Anyway, a lot of young men were bald, so what the hell? He finished his toilet cheerfully.

On his way back along the gallery, he passed a heavily-built young man with a towel round his neck, making for the bathroom.

"Mornin'," he said.

"Mornin', Pop," replied the young man jauntily.

He glared at the retreating broad back, and turned into his room. Pop, was it? The sinking feeling was slowly returning, and he cursed himself for a fool. He dressed carefully in clean underwear, spotless dungarees, and a blue roll-neck sweater. The clean underwear was essential today—later on he would have to drop his pants for the doctor; that is, if he got so far.

He paused in the act of taking down his navy-blue jacket from behind the door. Half-remembered habits of his childhood flooded back into his memory, and his mother seemed to be saying, "If you ever want help badly, Jimmy, call on the Lord—"

He turned to the bed, and sank slowly to his knees beside it.

The barn-like dining-room was filled with the cheerful clatter of plates and the penetrating smell of kippers. He poured himself a mug of tea and settled at his usual table.

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An old man in a brown smock hurried over with a steaming plate of porridge. "Mornin', Dusty," said the waiter.

He had discovered fifty years ago that it was impossible to separate the nickname, Dusty, from his surname, Miller, but he still detested it. "Mornin', Sammy," he growled. "What's the burgoo like this mornin'?"

"Usual." The waiter lowered himself into a chair. "Goin' down to the Pool today?"

"Aye." Dusty spooned the thick porridge down his throat. "'Bout time I shipped out again. What else is on?"

"Kippers 'n' bacon. I'll get you one." He struggled to his feet and disappeared into the kitchen.

Dusty watched him speculatively. How long ago was it that he'd sailed with Sammy? Fifteen years? Yes, about that. How time did pass on. He sighed, and drank his tea.

The waiter returned with another plate, and sat down again. "Ever think of swallowin' the hook, Dusty?" he asked, a shade too innocently.

Dusty stiffened in the act of picking up his knife and fork. "No," he said with studied casualness, "I reckon I've a few more years in me yet. Why?"

"Just wondered. You must be gettin' on a bit, now."

In a rush of anger, Dusty barked, "Damn it, Sammy, a man's as old as he feels." He poked the kipper savagely with his fork. "What the devil d'you do to these bloody kippers—soak 'em in turps all night?"

The Liver clock was striking nine as Dusty came out of the Home. A cold gust of wind blew up from the river, and he sniffed it like an old game-dog returning to the chase. Too early to go to the Pool yet.

He walked briskly along the Dock Road towards the pier head, still furious with Sammy, with the hefty young man who called him Pop, with the whole damned bunch of them who thought he was too old to go to sea.

He came to the brand-new Pool building, and hesitated at the door, his heart thumping furiously. No—not yet. He walked on, round the Cunard Building, and on to the pier head. The familiar sight of river and ships caught at his throat as if he was seeing it for the first time.

He stood by the rail and watched an inward-bound Harrison boat, with her attendant tugs, steam slowly up-river. There was a great emptiness in him, as though something very precious was slipping irretrievably away; and his eyes misted until he could hardly see the other side of the river.

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He blinked and swallowed hard. You're not beaten yet, you old fool, he thought. He turned abruptly from the river and walked back to the Pool . . .

The young, uniformed clerk behind the counter took the pink paper from him, looked at it in a bored way, and said, "Your leave's not finished yet."

"No—but my money is. I'd like to ship out as soon as possible." Dusty's knees were trembling uncontrollably, and he cursed them under his breath.

The clerk looked dubious for a moment, then strolled nonchalantly over to a cabinet, picked out a file, and returned with it. "Oh, I see your contract's expired—want to renew it?"

Dusty gripped the edge of the counter. "Yes, please," he said carefully.

"O.K. Go up and pass the doctor, will you?" The clerk wrote out a chit and pushed it under the grille.

He didn't notice my age on the file, thought Dusty exultantly.

He passed quickly through the turnstile and up the stairs. The green-coated medical orderly took his chit, and he sat down heavily on a wooden bench. So far, so good; so far, so good—the stupid phrase went racing round his brain until the words didn't make sense.

He sat back, took out his pipe and pouch, and began to stuff tobacco into the charred bowl with shaking fingers. He was just putting a match to it when a distant voice bawled, "Miller!" The match flew from his hand in a blazing arc and spluttered out on the floor.

The orderly looked round and took up the doctor's cry, "Miller!"

Dusty stood up, pushed the untasted pipe back into his pocket, and stepped forward. Now for it, now for it, sang the refrain in his head.

He walked past the orderly and entered the examining-room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Mornin', Doctor." He detected a slight quaver in his voice, and strove desperately to control it.

The doctor looked up from his desk and smiled pleasantly. "Morning." He glanced at the chit. "Contract renewal, is it? Right; drop your trousers and lift your shirt—er—jersey."

Dusty felt the cold, probing finger of the stethoscope, but he had no fear of it.

"That's fine," said the doctor at last. "Teeth? Mm—I think you'll do." He returned to his desk and initialed the chit; then opened the file to make an entry.

Dusty, his dungarees halfway up, watched him, paralysed.

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" Oh—" the doctor's pen stopped in mid stroke—" I see you were sixty-five three days ago, Miller."

It had happened.

" That's right, Doctor," he croaked. He suddenly felt very tired. All the things he had thought of to say in this situation were forgotten. What was the use, anyway? He waited dully for the coup de grâce.

The doctor was annoyed. They should have spotted this at the counter below. He drummed the file with his finger and looked up, frowning.

For a long moment he gazed at the proud, weather-beaten face before him, noticing the quivering lower lip, the beaten look in the fierce, blue eyes. " How long have you been going to sea, Miller? " he asked gently.

" Just on fifty years, Doctor." The old man's chin lifted.

" Through both wars? "

Dusty nodded.

" Right," said the doctor, coming to an abrupt decision. " Another two years shouldn't hurt you. Feeling O.K., aren't you? "

The transformation was miraculous. Dusty beamed his relief. " Never felt better in me life, Doctor," he said, his voice ringing clear.

" Right," said the doctor again. " You're fit, as far as I'm concerned."

He quickly completed the file. " Take this back to the counter—" he passed over the chit—" and good luck."

" Thank you, sir," said Dusty simply.

The bored, young clerk pushed a folded piece of pasteboard under the grille. " There's your contract, Miller," he said. " Go through and get your ship."

He peered through the grille at Dusty's smiling face. " You're looking very pleased with yourself."

" I am, son." Dusty took a deep, happy breath. " By God, I am."

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★ ★ ★

DRIPPING AFFECTION

The truth I do not stretch or shove
When I state the dog is full of love.
I've also proved, by actual test,
A wet dog is the lovingest.

OGDEN NASH, *The Dog*

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BACK OF BEYOND

The fast-flying night express
razored along unseen tracks

BY RAY BRADBURY

CROSSING the continental United States by night or by day on the train, you flash past town after wilderness town where nobody ever gets off. Or rather, no person who doesn't belong, no person who hasn't roots in these country graveyards, ever bothers to visit their lonely stations or attend their lonely views.

I spoke of this to a fellow passenger, another salesman like myself, on the Chicago-Los Angeles train as we were crossing Iowa.

"True," he said. "People get off in Chicago—everyone gets off there. People get off in New York, in Boston, in Los Angeles. People who don't live there go there to see and come back to tell. But what tourist ever got off at Fox Hill, Nebraska, just to *look* at it? You? Me? No! I don't know anyone; got no business there, it's no health resort, so why bother?"

"Wouldn't it be a fascinating change," I said, "some year to plan a really different holiday? Pick some village lost on the plains where you don't know a soul and go there for the hell of it?"

"You'd be bored stiff."

"I'm not bored thinking of it."

I peered out of the window. "What's the next town coming up on this line?"

"Rampart Junction."

I smiled. "Sounds good. I might get off there."

"You're a liar and a fool. What do you want? Adventure? Romance? Go ahead, jump off the train. Ten seconds later you'll call yourself an idiot, grab a taxi, and race us to the next town."

"Maybe."

I watched telephone poles flick by, flick by, flick by. Far ahead I could see the first faint outlines of a town.

"But I don't think so," I heard myself say.

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The salesman across from me looked faintly surprised.

For slowly, very slowly, I was standing up. I reached for my hat. I saw my hand fumble for my one suitcase. I was surprised at myself.

"Hold on!" said the salesman. "What're you doing?"

The train rounded a curve suddenly. I swayed. Far ahead I saw one church spire, a deep forest, a field of summer wheat.

"It looks as if I'm getting off the train," I said.

"Sit down," he said.

"No," I said. "There's something about that town up ahead. I've got to go see. I've got the time. I don't have to be in Los Angeles, really, until next Monday. If I don't get off the train now, I'll always wonder what I missed, what I let slip by when I had the chance to see it."

"We were just talking. There's nothing there."

"You're wrong," I said. "There is."

I put my hat on my head and lifted the suitcase.

"Good heavens," said the salesman, "I think you're really going to do it."

My heart beat quickly. My face was flushed.

The train whistled. The train rushed down the track. The town was near.

"Wish me luck," I said.

"Luck!" he cried.

I ran for the porter, yelling.

There was an ancient flake-painted seat tilted back against the station platform wall. On this seat, completely relaxed so that he sank into his clothes, was a man of some seventy years whose timbers looked as if he'd been nailed there since the station was built.

The sun had burnt his face dark and tracked his cheek with lizard folds and stitches that held his eyes in a perpetual squint. His hair smoked ash-white in the summer wind. His blue shirt, open at the neck to show white clocksprings, was bleached like the staring, late-afternoon sky. His shoes were blistered as if he had held them, uncaring, in the mouth of a stove. His shadow under him was stencilled a permanent black.

As I stepped down, the old man's eyes flicked past every door on the train, then stopped, surprised, at me.

I thought he might wave.

But there was only a sudden colouring in his secret eyes, a chemical change that was recognition. Yet he had not twitched so much as his mouth, an eyelid, a finger. An invisible bulk had shifted inside him.

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The moving train gave me an excuse to follow it with my eyes. There was no one else on the platform. No cars waited by the cobwebbed, nail-shut office. I alone had departed the iron thunder to set foot on the choppy waves of platform timber.

The train whistled over the hill.

Fool! I thought. My fellow passenger had been right. I would panic at the boredom I already sensed in this place. All right, I thought, fool, yes, but run, no!

I carried my suitcase down the platform, not looking at the old man. As I passed, I heard his thin bulk shift again, this time so clearly I could hear it. His feet were coming down to touch and tap the mushy boards.

I kept walking.

" Afternoon," a voice said faintly.

I knew he was not looking at me, but only at that great cloudless spread of shimmering sky. " Afternoon," I said.

I started up the road towards the town. One hundred yards away, I glanced back. The old man, still seated there, stared at the sun, as if posing a question.

I hurried on.

I moved through the dreaming, late-afternoon town, utterly anonymous and alone, a trout going upstream, not touching the banks of a clear-running river of life that drifted all about me.

My suspicions were confirmed: it was a town where nothing happened, where only the following events occurred. At four o'clock sharp, the door of Honnegar Hardware slammed as a dog came out to dust himself in the road; four-thirty, a straw sucked emptily at the bottom of a soda glass, making a sound like a great cataract in the drugstore silence; five o'clock, boys and pebbles plunged in the town's river; five-fifteen, ants paraded in the slanting light under some elm trees.

And yet—I turned in a slow circle—somewhere in this town there must be something worth seeing. I knew it was there. I knew I had to keep walking and looking. I knew I would find it.

I walked, I looked.

All through the afternoon there was only one constant and unchanging factor: the old man in the bleached blue trousers and shirt was never far away. When I sat in the drugstore he was outside spitting tobacco that rolled itself into tumblebugs in the dust. When I stood by the river he was crouched downstream making a great thing of washing his hands.

About seven-thirty in the evening I was walking for the seventh or eighth time through the quiet streets when I heard footsteps beside me.

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I looked over; the old man was keeping in step with me, gazing straight ahead, a piece of dried grass in his stained teeth.

"It's been a long time," he said.

We walked along in the twilight.

"A long time," he said, "waitin' on that station platform."

"You?" I said.

"Me." He nodded in the tree shadows.

"Were you waiting for someone at the station?"

"Yes," he said. "For you."

"Me?" The surprise must have shown in my voice. "But why? You've never seen me before in your life."

"Did I say I had? I just said I was waitin'."

We were on the edge of town now. He had turned and I had turned with him along the darkening river bank towards the viaduct where the night trains ran over going east, going west, but rarely stopping.

"You want to know anything about me?" I asked suddenly. "Are you the sheriff?"

"No, not the sheriff. And no, I don't want to know nothing about you." He put his hands in his pockets. The sun had set now. The air was suddenly cool. "I'm just surprised you're here at last, that's all."

"Surprised?"

"Surprised," he said, "and . . . pleased."

I stopped abruptly and looked straight at him. "How long have you been sitting on that station platform?"

"Twenty years, give or take a few."

I knew he was telling the truth; his voice was as easy and quiet as the river.

"Waiting for me?" I said.

"Or someone like you," he said.

We walked on in the growing dark.

"How do you like our town?"

"Nice, quiet," I said.

"Nice, quiet." He nodded. "Like the people?"

"People look nice and quiet."

"They are," he said. "Nice, quiet."

I was ready to turn back, but the old man kept talking; and in order to listen and be polite I had to walk with him in the vaster darkness, in the tides of field and meadow beyond the town.

"Yes," said the old man, "the day I retired, twenty years ago, I sat down on that station platform and there I been, sittin', doin' nothin', waitin' for somethin' to happen. I didn't know what, I didn't know, I couldn't say. But when it finally happened, I'd know it. I'd look at it and say, Yes, sir, that's

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what I been waitin' for. Train wreck? No. Old woman friend come back to town after fifty years? No. No, it's hard to say. Someone. Something. And it seems to have something to do with you. I wish I could say— "

"Why don't you try?" I said.

The stars were coming out. We walked on.

"Well," he said slowly, "you know much about your own insides?"

"You mean my stomach, or you mean psychologically?"

"That's the word. I mean your head, your brain. You know much about that?"

The grass whispered under my feet. "A little."

"You hate many people in your time?"

"Some."

"We all do. It's normal enough to hate, ain't it, and not only hate but, while we don't talk about it, don't we sometimes want to hit people who hurt us, even kill them?"

"Hardly a week passes we don't get that feeling," I said, "and put it away."

"We put away all our lives," he said. "The town says thus and so, and dad says this and that, the law says such and such. So you put away one killing and another and two more after that. By the time you're my age, you got lots of that kind of stuff between your ears. And unless you went to war, nothin' ever happened to get rid of it."

"Some men shoot or hunt," I said. "Some men box or wrestle."

"And some don't. I'm talkin' about them that don't. Like me. All my life I've been saltin' down those bodies, putting 'em away in my head. Sometimes you get mad at a town and the people in it for makin' you put things aside like that. You like the old cave men who just gave a yell and whanged someone on the head with a club."

"Which all leads up to . . ."

"Which all leads up to: everybody'd like to do one killin' in his life, to sort of work off that big load of stuff, all those killin's in his mind he never had the guts to do. And once in a while a man has a chance. Someone runs in front of his car. Nobody can prove nothin' with that sort of thing.

"The man don't even tell himself he did it. He just didn't get his foot on the brake in time. But you know and I know what really happened, don't we?"

"Yes," I said.

The town was far away now. We crossed over a small stream by a wooden bridge, near the railway embankment.

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" Now," said the old man, looking at the water, " the only kind of killin' worth doin' is the one where nobody can guess who did it or why they did it or who they did it to. Right?

" Well, I got this idea maybe twenty years ago. I don't think about it every day or every week. Sometimes months go by, but the idea's this: only one train stops here each day, sometimes not even that. Now, if you wanted to kill someone you'd have to wait, wouldn't you, for years and years, until a complete and actual stranger came to your town? A stranger who got off the train for no reason, a man nobody knows and who don't know nobody in the town.

" Then, and only then, I thought, sittin' there on the station seat, you could just go up, and when nobody's around kill him and throw his body in the river. He'd be found miles downstream. Maybe he'd never be found. Nobody would ever think to come to Rampart Junction to find him. He wasn't goin' there. He was on his way somewhere else.

" There, that's my whole idea. And I'd know that man the minute he got off the train. Know him, just as sure . . . "

I had stopped walking. It was dark. The moon would not be up for an hour.

" Would you? " I said.

" Yes," he said. I saw the motion of his head looking at the stars. " Well, I've talked enough."

He sidled close and touched my elbow. His hand was feverish, as if he had held it to a stove before touching me. His other hand, his right hand, was hidden, tight and bunched, in his pocket. " I've talked enough."

Something screamed.

I jerked my head.

Above, a fast-flying night express razored along the unseen tracks, flourished light on hill, forest, farm, town dwellings, field, ditch, meadow, ploughed earth, and water, then, raving high, cut off, shrieking, gone. The rails trembled for a little while. Then silence . . .

The old man and I stood looking at each other in the dark. His left hand was still holding my elbow. His other hand was still hidden.

" May I say something? " I said at last.

The old man nodded.

" About myself," I said. I had to stop for a moment—I could hardly breathe. Then I forced myself to go on. " It's funny. I've often thought the same way as you. Sure, just today, going cross-country, I thought how perfect, how really perfect it could be. Business has been bad for me lately. Wife ill. Good friend

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died last week. War in the world. Full of boils, myself. It would do me a world of good— "

" What? " the old man said, his hand still on my arm.

" To get off this train in a small town," I said, " where nobody knows me, with this gun under my arm, and find someone and kill him and bury him and go back to the station and get on and go home, and nobody the wiser and nobody ever to know who did it. Perfect, I thought, a perfect crime. And I got off the train."

We stood there in the dark for another minute, staring at each other. Perhaps we were listening to our hearts beating very fast . . .

The world turned under me. I clenched my fists. I wanted to fall. I wanted to scream, like the train.

For suddenly I saw that all the things I had just said were not lies put forth to save my life.

All the things I had just said to this man were true.

And now I knew why I had stepped from the train and walked up through this town. Now I knew what I had been looking for.

I heard the old man breathing hard and fast. His hand was tight on my arm as if he might fall. His teeth were clenched. He leaned towards me as I leaned towards him.

There was a terrible silent moment of immense strain as before an explosion.

He forced himself to speak at last. It was the voice of a man crushed by a monstrous burden.

" How do I know you've got a gun under your arm? "

" You don't know." My voice was blurred. " You can't be sure."

He waited. I thought he was going to faint.

" That's how it is? " he said.

" That's how it is," I said.

He shut his eyes tight. He shut his mouth tight.

After another five seconds, very slowly, very heavily, he managed to take his hand away from my own immensely heavy arm. He looked down at his right hand then, and took it, empty, out of his pocket.

Slowly, with great weight, we turned away from each other and started walking blind, completely blind, in the dark . . .

The midnight *Passenger To Be Picked Up* flare sputtered on the rails. Only when the train was pulling out of the station did I lean from the open Pullman door and look back.

The old man was seated there on the seat against the station wall, with his faded blue trousers and shirt and his sunbaked face

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and his sunbleached eyes. He did not glance at me as the train slid past. He was gazing east along the empty rails where tomorrow or the next day or the day after the day after that, a train, some train, any train, might fly by here, might slow down, might stop. His face was fixed, his eyes were blindly frozen, towards the east.

He looked a hundred years old.

The train wailed.

Suddenly old myself, I leaned out, squinting.

Now the darkness that had brought us together stood between. The old man, the station, the town, the forest, all were lost in the night.

For an hour I stood in the roaring blast, staring back at all that darkness.

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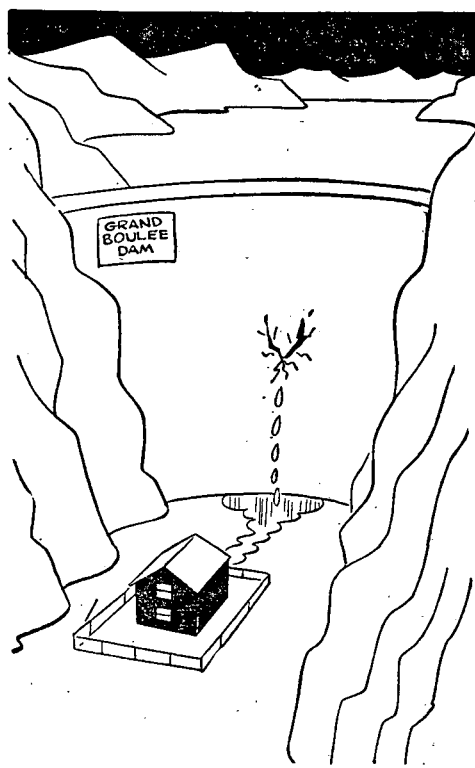

"I can't stand the sound of that drip, drip, drip."

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THE TALLEST MAN IN THE WORLD

No act is too big to turn its back on publicity

BY JANET GREEN

I GAVE up the idea of sleep and lay waiting for the dawn. Night showed black through a chink in the heavy hotel curtains. When the black became opaque, I slipped out of bed, crossed to the window, pulled back the curtains, and watched the first light creep over the top of Edinburgh Castle and spread through the railings along Princes Street.

Then I saw it.

The tallest man in the world. Swinging from the lamp post, its coat tails dancing in the wind; and in the distance, Maxie running. He hardly seemed to touch the ground, he ran so fast.

I pulled trousers on over pyjamas, grabbed my overcoat, and raced down the well of the stairs. Round and round and out of the hotel.

I had to catch Maxie.

As I pelted across the tram lines, my mind went back to the beginning. Open at the music hall in Birmingham, close at the Alhambra in Edinburgh, and in between a long string of rich dates . . .

Big Maxie was flying in from Stockholm with the six Dwarfs. I remembered the morning well. A clear, bright day and my heart so light as I drove the big man's Rolls to the airport. The Indian summer we had been grateful for had tempted Papa Gaudin to keep his circus playing four more weeks, and Maxie was booked to open at the music hall in Birmingham on the following night without his usual holiday.

I hoped he would like the supporting bill. The dates I knew would please him. All short journeys and top capacities. Maxie was never happy when the Dwarfs spent their Sundays in the car. He liked the little men to be in the new town for lunch so that they could see and be seen. The Dwarfs loved admiration. Maxie would laugh and encourage them to strut and posture

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for it wherever they went. He had loved the Dwarfs as if they were his children since he first met them after the war as he was making his way from Vilna across war-wrecked Europe to Liège.

At Dusseldorf they did not like Maxie's papers and flung him into a D.P. camp.

Coming from one more futile attempt to get some sense out of the overworked officials, he walked beside the barbed wire and looked out on the world that had abandoned him.

Then he saw them. Behind the latrine sheds. Six Dwarfs poised in the shape of a pyramid.

He stood in the noisome shadows and watched.

The formation broke and the Dwarfs turned somersaults, handsprings, and cartwheels, until they had placed themselves in the shape of a new pyramid, working all the time with deftness and precision.

Maxie knew that he was in the presence of performers akin to himself, and felt like a man lost in a strange country who suddenly hears his own language spoken. Not till the Dwarfs stopped and left the place did Maxie's nostrils again complain.

Each day for a week he came back. The six Dwarfs were always there—a bunch of bedraggled little men rehearsing with an indomitable belief in their future. Maxie knew that as long as he was in that camp of forgotten people, the courage they showed would draw him to their side like a magnet.

On the eighth day Maxie saw an official attempt to move them away and heard the myopic one in the horn-rimmed spectacles, whom the others called Spiro, protest, saying in French that he had found the only place in the camp where they could rehearse their act without fear of disturbance or interruption. Nobody, the little man insisted, wanted to come to the corner behind the latrines. The harassed, overworked official, tired no doubt of endless questions and complaints in so many different languages, gave Spiro a push and the Dwarf sprawled on the ground. Then the official felt himself lifted in the air by a massive hand that held him by the collar of his shirt while a blond Giant said in Polish, " They are performers. They must rehearse."

I could imagine how, when Maxie released him, the official would go—quickly.

The Dwarfs saw Maxie, the Strong Man, pick up Spiro and, sitting him on his wide hand to bring him level with his face, look at him carefully, toss him high in the air, then catch him in his arms like a ball. And the Giant laughed. A deep, warm laugh that told the Dwarfs he was their ally.

Spiro saw the possibilities at once. He was an erudite little man and, of course, he had read Swift. He told Maxie the story

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of *Gulliver's Travels* and together they worked out the details of a new act. Maxie and the Dwarfs rehearsed every daylight hour until they reached perfection; then they waited for a night without a moon, and went under the barbed wire.

At Liège Maxie found Papa Gaudin getting the Big Top out of mothballs.

The old French showman has never tired of telling how they came, walking into the centre of the Big Top as he was rehearsing the Liberty horses. Maxie, with all six Dwarfs on his shoulders, in his arms, all over him. Papa Gaudin embraced Maxie, who was the best and bravest Strong Man he knew, and the little men dropped to the ring where they waited. The Dwarfs knew they were safe. Spiro had told them that Maxie and they were one.

Papa Gaudin had learnt to trust his instinct. He knew quality when he saw it. Maxie and the six Dwarfs went into the Circus that night. They were great then, but became greater during the succeeding months.

Maxie was the showman of the outfit. Spiro was the brains. I never saw that Dwarf without an armful of books. When he stood by himself and you shut your eyes to his puniness, he looked like a professor in his well-worn Norfolk jacket. He had great knowledge and lost no opportunity to air it. I never trusted Spiro. I resented the way he always behaved like a full-sized man. I like a Dwarf to stay a Dwarf.

As the airport came in sight, I drove past an advertisement hoarding. A comely blonde testified that somebody's toothpaste could be relied upon to give me that winning smile. I cursed the lady for reminding me of Del Roy and her trapeze act, then quickly steeled myself against the thought.

I had not forgotten Spiro's ban on acrobats of any kind, but when Frankie Diamond's troupe split up I saw the chance to snatch his magnificent itinerary of booking-dates. I was forced to take his bill as it stood and that included one trapeze performer. I told myself that Spiro would have to swallow Del Roy. That string of plum dates would surely sweeten the mouthful.

I had the photographers waiting when the plane touched down. Maxie came out on to the steps with the Dwarfs, who hardly had time to see the cameras before they climbed on his shoulders and from there made a line-up on the fuselage. They preened themselves, tightening the belts of their camel's-hair coats, fingering the snapbrims of their Tyrolean hats. They dressed like Maxie down to their pigskin gloves and smart buckskin shoes. I admitted to myself that it was good showmanship, with Maxie

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pretending he did not know where they had gone. The blond Giant made a fool of by the tiny men. The cameras took it all in and I was grateful. No act is too big to turn its back on that kind of publicity.

When Maxie saw me he waved, and a grin spread over his face. I always found time to meet Maxie myself. In summer's sun, winter's frost, whether it was plane, train, or boat, I was there; yet he never failed to look surprised and grateful because I had come to meet him.

I was happy that day as I walked quickly to greet the big man. To be with Maxie was like standing on a rock in front of the sea getting a good blow, after you had been holed up in a room for a year with no ventilation. I loved the look of Maxie. He was huge and well-set in legs, body, and arms. His golden hair grew in tight, defiant curls close to his head. His eyes were grey and laughing. Maxie was full of good and had no evil in him.

Together we got the six Dwarfs through the Customs. The cameras followed all the way. Spiro gave his usual interview in impeccable English. He had a great line—the pocket acrobat who understood Joyce and Bernard Shaw. When Maxie thought that Spiro had said enough, he put his hand gently on the Dwarf's shoulder. Spiro stopped as soon as he felt the kindly pressure. He appeared to be devoted to Maxie, but I was never without the feeling that one day I would find Spiro's knife between those massive shoulder blades.

I was wrong about Spiro. He did love Maxie. Simply and completely.

When we drove out of the airport, Maxie was at the wheel. I sat beside him and the Dwarfs were in the back. As we passed the hoarding advertising the blonde's teeth, they almost bit me. I thought of Del Roy and told Maxie at once that the new bill I had taken over for him opened with a trapeze act. I felt Spiro's garlic-laden breath on the back of my neck and hastened to explain why it had been impossible to drop Del Roy. Maxie nodded, satisfied, and I heard Spiro talking to the Dwarfs in some language they all understood.

I was never without an uncanny feeling about those Dwarfs. They seemed like one entity, with Spiro as the head and the others the body. That was how I always thought of them. Spiro and the Body.

I smelt the garlic again and knew that Spiro was behind me. "As long as the act is up to standard, we're happy," he said.

I felt the garlic recede and was happy myself.

As soon as we left Uxbridge behind us, Maxie pulled the Rolls up under the shade of a tree and asked Spiro for the nuts. I

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never knew what was coming next with Maxie, but was prepared for anything.

He put his hand in his pocket and brought out two little furry creatures, placing them on his blue silk handkerchief. I thought they were moles till Maxie said softly, "Golden hamsters. Aren't they pretty?"

Spiro dropped a small packet of nuts into Maxie's lap and the big man fed the tiny animals. They filled their little pouches till they bulged and their bright eyes shone.

Maxie laughed and laughed. The Dwarfs delighted in his happiness.

When the Golden hamsters bulged enough, Maxie put them back in his pocket. I turned and looked inquiringly at Spiro.

"Maxie thought their cage was too small," he said.

"A nasty fine if you'd been caught smuggling those things through," I told Maxie.

"We'll get a cage for them in the next town." He smiled.

After we had bought the cage and the Golden hamsters were bedded down, Maxie began to sing a lewd French number that I always thought of as his song. He would render it in all sorts of languages, as the mood took him. The Dwarfs joined in. They knew the tune and the language did not matter to them The effect was babel.

The song lasted us all the way to Birmingham. Sometimes, as we waited for the traffic lights to change, I could see how the Dwarfs amused the occupants of other cars.

I was glad that Maxie was having fun. I knew he would be in a high state of nerves by the time he opened on the following night. It was always the same when he brought the act from the tent to the stage; and that year there had been no interim of rest.

It turned out that I was right. Maxie was so nervous that he stayed in his dressing-room till Spiro called him.

Spiro never trusted call-boys. Come to that, Spiro never trusted anybody.

Once again Maxie and the six Dwarfs were a smash hit. The mise en scène against which they performed was enchanting: a Lilliputian town square, with Maxie towering above the roof-tops and the Dwarfs popping in and out of windows and doors. Two of the little men, both exactly alike, did an impossible tumbling trick. Actually they were not even related. Born at opposite ends of Europe, I believe. But people loved the idea of twin dwarfs and would talk about it in the bar afterwards. Of course, it was Spiro who saw to it that they both dyed their hair the identical shade of fiery red.

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The smallest Dwarf was a Spaniard. He played the trumpet, and at times I felt he could have topped the bill on his own. Spiro had him grow a Vandyke beard.

The one who wore the fez, a squat, swarthy Turk, running a little to fat, had the happy trick of throwing up no less than sixteen balls at one time. They dropped into pockets all over him—on his shoulders, on his heels, and on the inner sides of his sleeves—while the Turk stood quite still and did nothing. What a round of applause he won for himself!

But I swear it was no bigger than the round that went to the thin, pale Dwarf from Lithuania who walked the tightrope and danced. He looked like something from under a mushroom, and Spiro gave him a maximum weight. He was not allowed to go half an ounce over. Of course, ounces are pounds with those people. I used to feel sorry for the skinny little fellow when he was dieting. I once slipped him some fudge, but it was back in my briefcase the same night, and I knew Spiro had put it there.

Spiro made wisecracks and spun ropes that writhed like tiny snakes in his small, fat hands. He also recited poetry. His "Once more unto the breach, dear friends," was quite a performance. It stopped the show, even on a Saturday night.

All that made it seem as if Maxie did nothing, but when you added the score it was everything.

The finale of their act was the Gulliver routine—the one they had worked out in the D.P. camp. It began with Spiro putting the lasso round Maxie; then all the Dwarfs, giggling and chattering, caught him in a net and brought him to the ground. From a diminutive house the Dwarfs brought multicoloured staples, hammers, mallets, and tried to fix the big man to the stage.

Suddenly there would be a great roll on the kettledrums, and the pinioned man would rise, pulling up the net with him and the Dwarfs with the net. Then Maxie started to turn. As he went faster and faster, the Dwarfs clung to the ends of the net and the mirrors which each held in his hands caught the lights and made a dazzling, moving pattern over the house. It looked like an animated carousel at a fair, heightened by the specially orchestrated music which sounded like that of a calliope.

The whole picture was breathtaking and the customers cheered. I stood up and cheered with them.

I had plenty to cheer about. I was Maxie's agent. I collected the ten per cent.

Sometimes Maxie and the Dwarfs stayed in a hotel, sometimes in digs, but always together. In Birmingham they had wonderful rooms out at Edgbaston. We went back to a fantastic supper with everybody sitting in front of his favourite dish. The Dwarfs

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travelled with their own cushions which made us all level at the table. I used to think at times that Spiro seemed bigger than me. The Turk was particularly pleased that night for Maxie had found him some rose-petal jam to go with his yogurt. He ate it with enormous relish, till Spiro slapped his elbows off the table. Then he cried.

Maxie took the Turk on to his knee, wiped the round, black eyes with his own blue silk handkerchief, and to cheer him up coaxed a song out of the melancholy Dwarf.

The Turk climbed to the top of a bookcase and sang Maxie's lewd French number. I listened to the sweet, high, treble voice and mused upon the cruelty of the Eastern races.

When Maxie was sure that the Turk was happy again, we played poker. The stakes were astronomical and the losses paid with I.O.U.s, which were meticulously carried forward to the next game. Inside that tight, little circle, Maxie and the Dwarfs had their own fiscal system. The real money was admirably looked after by Spiro. Their agreed intention was to retire one day to an orange farm in the south.

According to my calculations they could have bought three of those dream farms already, but I never went for that vision of the future. I knew that Maxie and the Dwarfs would go on trouping till the theatre fell in and the Big Top mouldered into dust. And that meant for ever.

My plan was to catch the midnight train to London, but as usual I went on the early morning train at six o'clock.

Maxie sent me upstairs to wash Spiro's cigar smoke out of my hair and I came down to find him waiting for me in the hall, looking as fresh as if he had just awakened from eight hours of solid sleep. When he put his arm round my shoulders and said, " Your props are in the car," I felt the warmth of his smile wrap me like a mantle.

As we slipped through the front door, the first light of morning was breaking over the smoke-scarred Birmingham suburb. Outside the gate the Body jumped up and down behind Spiro, calling to Maxie and each other in half a dozen different lingos.

Spiro spoke my name, and I heard him say above the babel, " Look, a new act for you. The tallest man in the world."

I did as the Dwarf bade me, and looking over the stunted privet hedge saw my coat hanging on a lamp post, the crossbar stuck through the sleeves and my hat crowning the top of the lamp. In front of the light was a roughly-cut mask through which the still-burning bulbs marked the eyes and mouth.

I turned sharply to Maxie, who was leaning against the door laughing, intending to say, " This is beyond a joke; " but he took

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off his own big camel's-hair coat and wrapped it warmly round me, saying, " Send it to me in a parcel—you'll miss another train if we stay to pull down the tallest man in the world." All my anger at the fate of my brand-new coat evaporated.

In the car I settled myself beside Maxie, while Spiro and the Body climbed in behind us. Through the rear window I saw a diffident morning breeze gently stir the tails of my coat as the tallest man in the world leered after us. We were off to a great accompaniment, for the noise we had made woke every barking dog in the neighbourhood.

I caught the train as it moved out of the platform. For a while Maxie and the Dwarfs kept pace with my carriage. They pranced round his legs waving their farewells, and I saw that Maxie was enormously delighted with the antics of his children.

I meant to pick Maxie up in a month's time at Nottingham, but the week came and went and I could not get away. The few months before Christmas are always a busy time for me and that year I was having one hell of a job persuading my new comedy find to do a new routine.

About nine weeks went by before I saw Maxie again and during the whole time I never gave a thought to Del Roy.

The town was Liverpool. Maxie and the Dwarfs were ready at the station with their usual boisterous welcome. I shook hands with the Body, pulled the ear of one, tweaked the nose of another, and bowed gravely to Spiro. I thought for a moment, before we all piled into the Rolls, that his myopic eyes behind the horn-rimmed spectacles seemed unusually preoccupied.

As Maxie swung the Rolls out of the station, he looked at me affectionately and said unnecessarily, " You're in front tonight, of course."

" Yes—but there's an act I want to pick up at the Arden first. I'll be in for the second show."

" Well, don't run away afterwards. I've got a big surprise for you."

Maxie was smiling as he began to sing his song, but I was conscious at once that something was wrong, out of place. Then I got it. He was singing alone. The Dwarfs were silent.

We all lunched together at their hotel. There was plenty to talk about. I had booked the act with Papa Gaudin in Paris for Christmas and had started negotiations for a European tour in the spring. I was only mildly surprised when Maxie told me not to rush into anything.

" You never know what's going to turn up," he said, grinning across the table.

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I saw Spiro watching him and a maggot of worry began to stir in my mind. Every now and then Maxie looked past us like a man searching for a familiar face. Suddenly he stood up and waved. I looked round. I was curious. Del Roy had come into the restaurant and was sitting alone at a table beneath the tall window. When I turned back, Spiro was looking at me. I raised my brows, but the Dwarf's expression remained blank and uninformative.

The hairs on the back of my neck began to tingle. Those hairs act like an alarm bell to me.

I was not surprised when Del Roy joined us for coffee, but I was astonished when Spiro rose at once, said he had a lot of reading to do, and left. The Body, of course, got up and followed him.

As I watched the Dwarfs file out of the restaurant, I put my hand to the back of my neck. The alarm bell was working overtime.

I must talk to Maxie, I noted anxiously. Those Dwarfs need coddling. And quick.

I looked at him. Maxie's whole attention was riveted on Del Roy. I suppose my interest must have penetrated, for he raised his head and invited me to drive to Chester. He accepted my answer without argument when I said I had a lot of sleep to catch up with, and they went for their drive without me.

As the Rolls spun away from the hotel, I heard Maxie's laugh cleanse the petrol-laden air, and saw the sudden flash of his blue silk handkerchief as he remembered me and waved good-bye.

Then I looked for Spiro.

He was not in the hotel. I went down to the theatre. The dressing-rooms were in darkness. I gathered my thoughts together and remembered all that reading he had to do. I knew at once where I would find Spiro.

When I reached the Public Library he was not there, but I did not anticipate a long wait. Spiro had said he wanted to read. I was sure the little man would appear.

Soon I saw his hat just above the counter and heard the librarian's friendly greeting. Spiro had been coming to these places for years and knew everybody by their Christian names. When he made his way towards the shelves marked BIOGRAPHY, I fell into step beside him. He did not look surprised to see me.

"What goes on?" I asked.

He put up his hand and took down a copy of the *Life of Napoleon*. "The Corsican was five-foot-four," I said. "I'll tell you before you tell me."

Spiro smiled.

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"I wish you liked me," he said. "I'm very attached to you."

For a moment I felt sorry for the agile mind imprisoned in the Dwarf's body. Then he laughed and the smell of garlic was suddenly strong.

My old dislike enveloped me, and I spoke brusquely. "When did Maxie fall for Del Roy? What happened?"

The little man began to talk.

At first his voice was quiet and controlled, but by the time he came to the end of his account the Dwarf was sweating with anger.

Spiro related how, the first night in Birmingham, he had watched the whole bill through and got Maxie down to the wings to see Del Roy at the start of the second show. Maxie agreed with him that it was a trite little act and not up to their standard. He asked Spiro to bring Del Roy to his dressing-room. But it was Spiro, sitting on the make-up bench, who spoke for Maxie.

"Your act is not good enough," Spiro said. "We are dropping you tonight. You will be paid as long as the tour lasts."

You'd have to do that, I thought. Del Roy's contract is as watertight as yours—then kicked myself for thinking like an agent. What was Del Roy to me? Apparently Del Roy had broken down and cried. Spiro said contemptuously that she looked as if she had been standing in the rain.

I knew exactly what he meant. The thin, pretty-faced girl would have stood drooping in front of Maxie with her tatty, Japanese kimono swinging open to reveal arms and legs like pea sticks. I envisaged her using every bit of waif appeal she had, straightening her child's shoulders as she looked bravely up at him to ask what she could do to make her act good enough to remain on the bill.

"I showed her the door," Spiro said. "I knew what was coming next. There was a stray dog in Madrid, a barefoot boy in Rome . . . " He shrugged wearily, took off his glasses, and wiped them. "Almost every capital in Europe has a similar memory and some are not easy to clear up."

"What happened to the Golden hamsters?" I asked.

"I found a home for them."

"Pity you couldn't have found a home for Del Roy."

Anger showed violently behind Spiro's thick glasses, and I went on quickly, "What happened next?"

Spiro's narrative showed me vividly the picture of Del Roy's fragile figure hurrying along the corridor and up the stone dressing-room stairs to the fly floor, with Maxie watching in the open doorway behind her.

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When he came back in, Maxie was pensive. Taking up a towel he had quickly rubbed his smooth, brown flesh till it shone.

"We were too rough, Spiro," he had said. "That little girl needs help." I groaned.

Spiro stood with his back against the books and sighed.

From Birmingham they had gone to Manchester. Although her part of the act was out, Del Roy travelled with the company. She told the stage manager, a sentimental, impressionable man, that she guessed she would stick around with the crowd. She hadn't got a home, she couldn't play any other dates the way her contract was, and her rooms were booked everywhere, so what the hell else was she to do? The stage manager found the opportunity to tell Maxie he was sorry for the kid and asked if Del Roy might use the stage sometimes to keep in practice.

I looked at Spiro and realised that he had suddenly become excited. His small, fat hands were trembling and I thought I saw saliva on his pale red lips.

"Now, as you know," he said, his voice curiously high, "it's an understood thing that we have the stage every morning from eleven-thirty on."

I nodded. I knew Maxie's rule.

Spiro became very heated. "Well, when we came on the stage next day, Del Roy's trapeze was up and she was swinging from the bar. I was going to stop her, but Maxie held my arm."

The image of Maxie was clear to me. He was standing on the side of the stage in his rehearsal kit. Tight black gabardine trousers, nothing above, and Spiro beside him reaching only as high as his waistline.

The Dwarf said Del Roy pointed to the stage clock. The hands were at eleven. The stage carpenter came through the pass door. "Who's been *mucking* this clock around?" he grumbled, and put the hands forward to eleven-thirty.

"Del Roy, of course," I said. Spiro spat.

Every morning after that, Del Roy was on the stage when they arrived. Directly she saw Maxie, she would call the Props and begin to clear her trapeze. I knew without asking that she had persistently ignored the Dwarfs. Then one morning she fell from the top bar. Spiro said the girl was a hell of a way up and would surely have broken her back if Maxie had not been there to catch her. She begged for time to climb again; it was the only way that she could regain her nerve.

Maxie lifted her to the rope and Del Roy swarmed rapidly up to swing herself into a sitting position on the top bar. Spiro said she looked like a skinny kid in her small, silk briefs and top.

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Del Roy swung herself through a few simple exercises then called suddenly, " Catch! "

Maxie looked up.

That time she fell deliberately and the Dwarfs saw him laugh before he caught and tossed her in the air like a ball. Then he lowered her gently to the stage.

Spiro stopped talking, took out his fine linen handkerchief with its elaborate monogram, and wiped his hands.

" There have been women before," I said, to comfort him.

" Not in the act," he answered.

I knew what Spiro meant.

" Now they rehearse every day," he said bitterly.

I was jerked into fresh attention—the Dwarf's voice was nearly a snarl.

" With what result? "

" We shall know tonight," he said crisply. " Maxie is going to show us all."

I whistled. I knew, if Maxie was ready for an exhibition, there must be something to see.

A librarian approached and told me to put out my cigarette. I stared at the girl. I did not even know I had lit it. Spiro was very upset. He said that they liked people to observe the rules in places like the Public Library and added that he was so easily remembered because of his size. I felt that I had let him down and apologised.

" I'll wait for you outside," I said. " I want to smoke."

The Dwarf came and stood on the broad top step outside the Public Library. I was two steps lower so that our faces were level. He passed me his morocco-leather cigar case and I helped myself. We lit the cigars slowly. Correctly. Spiro had a fine taste in cigars—they were worth the attention. When the Dwarf's cigar was well alight, he took it out of his mouth and slowly savoured the smoke.

" We have a good act," he said mildly. " We should not be happy if anything disturbed it."

Spiro then smiled grimly and went off.

I watched the little man cross the square, pass the near-black, Ionic-pillared Town Hall, until he was lost in the crowds outside the theatre. Above his head I saw the week's bill and read the boldly-printed words: MAXIE AND THE DWARFS. The title looked very permanent.

I walked towards the Mersey.

Standing by the top rail of the New Brighton ferry boat I looked across the water and pretended that I was fascinated by the traffic of the grey-green Mersey. The ferry boat cut across

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a merchantman's wake and in clear, yellow letters on the ship's stern I read the name, *Neseta, Barcelona* . . .

The image of many different coloured rats racing across a hotel bedroom in Barcelona filled my mind. I stood quite still and allowed the memory to grow.

Three years before, Maxie and the Dwarfs had made a short spring tour of the main Spanish cities. From Barcelona I received a letter written by a friend of mine who was on the bill, tipping me off that Sam Ellerman, the European end of a big American film agency, had been talking to Spiro. My friend did not know the outcome of their talks. On the principle that what is mine should remain mine, I flew to Barcelona.

The city was empty of Sam. There was a wild rumour around the bars that he had been chased out of his hotel by a plague of rainbow-coloured rats—rats that somehow showed themselves only to Sam. I knew Ellerman well. He suffered from our occupational disease—ulcers. This meant that he was permanently on the wagon. I had an idea those rats were real.

I could not persuade Spiro to talk, although I stayed in Barcelona until the end of the week, when the Spanish tour was finished and we all took the train to Paris.

At the frontier the French people made a big business of looking through the luggage. I happened to be next to Spiro, and as they searched his cases I saw several tins of luminous paint. I picked up one of them.

"Phosphorescent posters could be very effective," Spiro had said blandly. I put down the paint.

I had some chocolate in my pocket. With it, I enticed the thin, pale Dwarf into the corridor of the train. He told me in French, a language that is almost my own, that Sam had made an offer for the Dwarfs to go to the coast—that means Hollywood in our parlance—to make a series of comedy two-reelers at top pay. It was a long-term contract which did not include Maxie. Spiro had turned it down flat. I asked if Maxie knew why Sam had been in Barcelona, and the thin, pale Dwarf smiled before he shook his head. I thought the smile was very gentle. For a Dwarf.

Sam did not understand loyalty. He just raised the ante. Then Spiro set the rats on him. I asked the pallid little man how it was done and learnt that Barcelona was the bearded Spaniard's home town and he had hordes of relatives, among them an uncle in the rat-catching trade.

I could guess the rest. The Dwarf ate the chocolate, licked his fingers, and went back to the compartment . . .

I turned on the deck of the ferry boat and put my face to the

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wind. Somehow I thought that it would take more than a troupe of coloured rats to frighten Del Roy. Years of experience had taught me that the small, slight ones you meet in show business are the toughest.

I got back to the Liverpool side in time to catch the act at the Arden and leave quickly, hoping the two fellows whose fooling was not good enough would never hear I had been in front.

I walked round to the theatre and met the first show coming out. As I went through the stage door, Del Roy passed me.

Maxie was in his dressing-room. The towel was extra busy and his golden-brown skin shone like satin.

" Anything good at the Arden? " he asked.

I shrugged my disappointment.

" Cheer up," he smiled, " perhaps the next time you put your hand in the hat, you'll bring out the right number."

From the top of Maxie's wardrobe trunk the theatre cat demanded his attention; with cunning understanding, he stroked behind her ears. The cat purred and rubbed her head against his hand. Maxie was delighted.

" Take care," I said. " She can scratch as well as purr."

But Maxie shook his head. " They never scratch me," he laughed.

I fortified myself in the bar for the rest of the evening and went to the last row of the circle to see Maxie close the bill, with the alarm bell at the back of my neck well-drowned in good Scotch whisky. When the last satisfied customer left the house, I made my way down to the empty stalls and saw that Maxie meant to do the thing in style. He had kept the full orchestra, the stage staff—the works.

Spiro and the Body filed into the second row of the stalls and I sat down about halfway back. I was irritated when the theatre manager and his wife came to sit just behind me. A nice woman, but she had been a performer herself and would lean forward to reminisce.

The conductor came into the pit, raised his baton and, with the down beat, led the orchestra into a rousing overture. The house lights dimmed and I saw the glow of Spiro's cigar. Soon it became the focal point from which I could not look away.

The curtain rose and I was able to shift my gaze.

Draped in black velvet tabs, the stage was completely blacked out except for a single spotlight shining on a silver bar twenty feet up. I realised that the borders had been raised as far as they would go and we were seeing a great deal more of the stage than is usually visible.

Maxie made his entrance from centre back. Picked up in a

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pinpoint spot he walked slowly towards the footlights, rolling a silver stick over his shoulders and into his arms. Then he tossed it into the air, caught it on one arm, threw it up again, and caught it on the other. The thing was thick for a stick and gleamed like water in the moonlight.

The drums began to roll and a shaft of light shot across the stage. Maxie started to twirl round and round, holding the silver stick straight out from his body at arm's length. Each time the stick came into the shaft of light it flashed. Suddenly he released his hold and the stick shot across the stage, up the beam of light, and abruptly stopped as if it was suspended in mid air. Then slowly it began to rise, twisting like a corkscrew, going higher and higher till it was level with the bar twenty feet up. Almost at once the stick was upright on the bar.

The lighting was clever—Del Roy must have put out her hands to catch the rope, but I never saw her move. It got me. I was impressed.

I saw the human silver stick shimmering on the bar and Maxie below on the stage. As he moved into the beam of light he was smiling. His golden hair shone. The human stick wavered on the bar, then balanced again. I looked up and down. Then up again. The drums stopped. Light poured suddenly from everywhere on to the silver stick.

"She's going to jump," I gasped, and did not know that I had spoken.

"She can't," said the manager's wife behind me. "There's no net." The words were no sooner spoken than she screamed.

The silver stick had fallen from the bar and, falling, turned over and over.

Maxie was still smiling as he put out his arms and with no apparent effort caught the stick, twirled it round his shoulders, across and round again.

He was laughing when he brought the silver stick forward and bowed over it.

The orchestra went into a long chord and the curtains fell. I swear that all through the performance Del Roy never moved a limb. She *was* the silver stick.

Maxie came through the tabs and took the call. He had his hand on top of the stick as if he was leaning on it, then suddenly took his hand away. Del Roy dropped her arms, moved her legs, and was suddenly alive. They bowed to us and to each other as if the house was packed.

I stood up and shouted, "Well done!" Then I saw the glow of Spiro's cigar and knew that he was looking straight at me. I

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shrugged. How was I to know that Del Roy had so much to sell? Maxie and the Dwarfs had seemed the tops. Till then.

Maxie was waiting for me on the stage. I noted that even the stage cloth was made of black velvet and the rope up which Del Roy had twisted of black, woven silk. The girl was trying to scratch between her shoulder blades, but without effect since her hands were covered with black velvet gloves. Maxie turned her round and with obvious familiarity scratched for her. I knew then she was his mistress.

As I stood beside them, I saw that Del Roy's boyish figure was sheathed in fine black velvet, with a wide ribbon of silver sequins running down the centre front and back. On her head she wore a spun-glass silver wig. Even standing so close to her and with the harsh light shining above our heads, she bewitched me. I still saw her as the silver stick.

I could see that Maxie was bursting for my approbation. More than all the paying customers in the world he wanted me, his ten per center, to say the act was good.

I told Maxie the truth. The act was unique.

As I finished, I smelt garlic and turned to face Spiro with the Body in a row behind him. On behalf of the Dwarfs he offered formal congratulations. Maxie shook hands with all his children, then presented them formally to Del Roy. Spiro bowed and the thin, pretty girl smiled.

As she rubbed her head lightly against Maxie's arm, I thought of the theatre cat. When I heard her say, " If they'll come up one by one, I'll give all the mannikins a kiss," I looked at her hands to see if the claws were out. Pulling herself tight against Maxie, she added, " It will make each one feel a man for once."

Spiro stiffened and the bell at the back of my neck burst into a noisy carillon.

" We have no need of that act of civility," he said, bowed again, and led the Body off the stage.

Del Roy was quite sure of Maxie; but I saw that he looked troubled and seemed about to reprove her. Then the conductor and the theatre manager's wife interrupted with their effusive congratulations and the moment was lost.

I spoke on the telephone early next morning to London, with the result that Maxie and the Silver Stick were in the bill that very night. They closed the first half, leaving Maxie and the Dwarfs their usual spot.

I was certain that the customers would love the new act, but I must admit I was not quite prepared for the overwhelming reception it got. When the curtains fell on the broad proscenium, there was absolute silence—as if the breath had been

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knocked right out of their lungs. Then it broke. Round after round of applause, backed by whistles, shouts, the stamping of feet, and here and there a programme thrown into the air.

Maxie and the Silver Stick were not just a smash. They were a riot. I think it was the emanation of sex that did it. The act was packed with the desire they felt for each other and their fulfilment of it. I knew that a goldmine was in my grasp, still I never thought of putting Del Roy under contract. We are an old-fashioned firm. My father always believed that a handshake was more binding than a dozen signatures on a management contract, and during the twenty years that I have run the business since my father's retirement I have never once regretted the old man's ruling.

I stayed with Maxie for a couple more days, then had to hurry over to Leeds before returning to London. When I did get back to my office, the offers had begun to roll in, and I was surprised at what a popular fellow I had become. It looked as if I would not need to buy a lunch for myself for months to come.

I decided to let things ride. There was no hurry. Maxie was booked with the Dwarfs in Paris for Christmas with Papa Gaudin. While he was there I would sift the offers and take the best for the New Year.

I had only been back in London ten days when Spiro called me from Edinburgh. The time was three o'clock in the morning. I knew who it was because the charges were reversed. I started to tell him that I had been watching a new Hungarian girl I had brought over, not bad—when Spiro interrupted urgently.

I listened to a couple of sentences and knew I must catch the first train.

Arriving in Edinburgh at about five o'clock on the afternoon of the same day, I saw Spiro on the platform. He looked pale, and by the time we reached the hotel I felt pale.

The first person we saw as we entered the foyer was Sam Ellerman. I greeted him politely but did not stay to talk. Spiro and I had a lot of conferring to do and I was anxious to get upstairs where we could do it in peace.

I let the Dwarf talk without a break. This time he had me so worried I did not even smell the garlic.

Sam had come into town the previous afternoon and had made an offer between shows. I waited for Spiro to tell me the gist of it. Sam wanted Maxie to do a coast-to-coast tour in America, starting immediately and ending at the New York Palace. Del Roy, determined to go, was urging Maxie to break his Christmas contract with Papa Gaudin.

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I looked at Spiro and raised my brows questioningly.

" The offer does not include us," he said quietly.

I felt cold. I knew the Silver Stick was good, but had never visualised Maxie without the Dwarfs. To me it would be like dropping half of himself if he went to the States and left them behind.

I said, " But Papa Gaudin. Maxie can't let him down."

" It is the woman," Spiro shrugged. " He is bemused."

I knew then that I should have forgotten my father's principles and put them all under contract. " I'll talk to Maxie," I said.

" Not till after the second show," Spiro ordered. " Maxie is always very nervous with the Stick. She is temperamental."

I believed him. I knew how tricky those skinny little tramps could be once they'd felt the first feather of success.

I saw Maxie at supper. The Dwarfs and Del Roy were all at the table with him.

Sam joined us. I was not sure why till he said, " I'm looking after this little lady's interests from now on." Then he patted Del Roy's knee. " Of course, Maxie's still your boy."

When I looked at Maxie he flushed and stared over the waiter's head.

We got down to brass tacks quickly. I found that Del Roy had only succeeded in part. Maxie was determined to play Paris at Christmas for Papa Gaudin, but had agreed to go to the States afterwards. He beamed suddenly as if he had thought of something pleasant, looked at the Dwarfs, and announced that it would be a wonderful holiday for them; then he added that they would be paid just the same as if they were still performing.

The big simpleton was so pleased and happy that I was sure he had no idea of the enormity of the insult he was heaping upon the Dwarfs. Nor had he realised what kind of a pay-off it was for Del Roy.

But the woman remembered. I could almost hear her purr, " Tit for tat, Mannikins." I looked at her as she sat, still and smiling, and knew that she had engineered the whole deal.

" We are not willing for the act to be split up," Spiro said softly.

The ten eyes of the Body watched and waited. They did not understand the language that was being spoken, but Dwarfs are very susceptible to atmosphere and they knew that the air was full of dissension.

Sam moved impatiently in his seat, and Maxie leaned across the table to speak to Spiro. " But I want to give you a holiday," he said earnestly. " You all deserve it. Afterwards we will be together again."

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The Turk, who had been watching intently, suddenly asked a question in his shrill, high voice. Spiro answered in a whisper and the Turk burst into tears as he sobbed out the answer to the other Dwarfs and pointed one of his pudgy fingers at Del Roy.

She looked at the Turk and laughed derisively.

The bearded Spaniard picked up a pitcher of water and flung it hard into Del Roy's face.

Spiro swept the Body out of the restaurant immediately. The Turk was still weeping and the others clustered round him, all trying to touch him. I thought it was because they wanted to comfort him.

Maxie, bewildered and distressed, looked after the Dwarfs and allowed Sam to help Del Roy dry herself.

I just sat and listened to my alarm bell. Then I heard Maxie voicing excuses for the Dwarfs in the manner of an indulgent father.

Del Roy did not say a word.

We had attracted too much attention to remain in the restaurant, so Maxie and I followed Sam, who took Del Roy upstairs. At the top of the stairs she turned and faced us, a few steps below her. When at last she spoke, her voice was very clear.

The issue was a simple one.

From that moment on it was either her or the Dwarfs.

She turned and went into a room a little way down the corridor. I heard the key click in the lock as she shut Maxie out.

He followed to the top of the stairs, then took a large bowl of flowers from a table and smashed it hard upon the floor. Afterwards he strode down the wide sweep of stairs and out of the hotel. For the first time since the bearded Spaniard threw the water in Del Roy's face, I saw that Maxie looked intensely angry.

As I turned to run after Maxie, I heard a movement and looked up to see the Dwarfs. All six of them. They were standing in a row on the landing above, peering through the balustrade. The Turk was still snivelling.

I raised my hands, then dropped them helplessly. Spiro copied the gesture and I felt a sudden camaraderie between us.

"We shall keep the act together," he said softly. I knew he meant to comfort me.

Spiro led the Body up more stairs and out of sight. I heard the Turk's high, thin voice wailing; then that, too, died away.

I shrugged and went to find Maxie.

Walking the hard old streets of Edinburgh, I felt cobblestones under my feet, and steps and tram lines, and all the time I was conscious of the dark hump of the Castle brooding over me.

I never found Maxie.

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Returning wearily to the hotel I observed that all the lights were out except for the half-lit chandelier above the hall. Passing slowly through the shadows I climbed the stairs to my room.

Spiro was sitting on my bed.

Hell, I thought, haven't I earned my ten per cent tonight?

"You can sleep now," he said. "I've fixed it. I found a solution."

The Dwarf looked very tired. I picked him up and stood him on the floor. He blinked at me from behind misty glasses, seemed about to say something more, then shook his head and went away.

I knew why Spiro was sad; he was a realist; he understood that the Dwarfs had to give up Maxie.

In spite of the little man's reassurances, sleep avoided me.

I went to Maxie's room once or twice but he had not returned. I passed Del Roy's room and saw that her door was slightly open. I guessed that she had left it that way to let Maxie know he was forgiven. I finally gave up the idea of sleep and lay waiting for the dawn . . .

By the time I reached the lamp post, Maxie was tearing down the tallest man in the world. The woman's head wobbled on her shoulders and the black, silk rope dangled from her neck.

Maxie was weeping.

He turned and moved with even steps along deserted Princes Street, carrying Del Roy's body carefully in his arms. I kept up with his long strides, but Maxie did not look at me or speak.

At the police station above Waverley he stopped and went in. I followed.

It was not until I sat quietly with Sam much, much later that I was able to put things in their proper order. Sam helped me to talk. Without his kindness I should have gone crazy.

When I had followed Maxie along Edinburgh's famous street I was sure he was crying for the Silver Stick; but it was not so—Maxie's tears were for his children.

He stood in front of the desk in the police station and said quietly, "I did it. I killed her." Then, like a temple offering, he laid the body before the astonished police sergeant.

Del Roy looked thinner and smaller in death than she ever had in life.

Two policemen came and took Maxie away. They were sure he was mad.

I begged them not to let him speak to anyone until I had found a lawyer; then I went straight back to Spiro.

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The Dwarf was asleep. I shook him and woke him and told him what had happened.

He sat up, listened, and gave me instructions. I obeyed at once, pulling the telephone towards me.

While I was locating the best lawyer in Edinburgh, Spiro dressed and went out of the room.

I arranged to meet the lawyer at the police station above Waverley, put down the receiver, and turned.

The Dwarfs were standing in a row before me. They were all washed and dressed, with their pigskin gloves on their hands, their buckskin shoes on their feet, and their camel's-hair coats tightly belted.

Spiro was pale and his skin glistened. "They did it," he said, "I shall take them to the police station and we shall confess."

I looked from one small face to the other. When I came to the Turk he pouted and looked at his feet. I stood up and led them out of the hotel. They followed me like a crocodile of obedient children.

The Dwarfs confessed. They confessed in every conceivable language.

The police checked their story. At one point it looked as if it would hold up. Till the night porter at the hotel remembered seeing Spiro leave my room at the exact time the doctor set for Del Roy's death. She was still warm when he examined the body and he was able to place the time within ten minutes.

That ruled out Spiro. And nobody believed the Body could have acted without its Head.

A policeman on his beat saw Maxie outside the stage door of the theatre, gazing fixedly at the bill, three-quarters of an hour before Del Roy was hanged. They found the broken bowl outside her door, his blue silk handkerchief on the floor of her room, his fingerprints on the locket that hung round her neck; so fact after fact began to lend substance to Maxie's repeated statement that he alone was responsible for Del Roy's death.

I begged the lawyer to arrange for Spiro and me to see him.

Maxie was gentle, friendly, and peaceful—but we could not move him. Spiro pleaded and argued, got down on his pudgy knees; but Maxie only lifted him up and stood him on the table so that their faces were level, then reminded Spiro of his duty to the Body.

"Go back, my friend," he said, his big hand resting gently on Spiro's shoulder. "See that my children are safe. Do not desert them as I did. Remember, they break what they do not understand. Their crime is my sin—I forsook them."

They made us leave and I took Spiro back to the hotel.

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He collapsed. I held him in my arms and forgot he was a dwarf.

I listened as he sobbed out his story of the night's happenings.

Spiro said that when he took the Dwarfs upstairs, he told them that they must let Maxie go without a struggle. He explained to the Body that it would only be for a little while. Maxie would grow tired of the woman—just as he had of the lame dog in Madrid, the barefoot boy in Rome, and the Golden hamsters in Birmingham. Then Maxie would come back to them and all would be as it was before.

Spiro was right, of course. Maxie would have come back eventually to his children.

Spiro said over and over again that the Body had agreed with him; otherwise he would not have left them.

"The Turk as well?" I asked.

Then Spiro beat his head with his two small fists. He had overlooked the Turk, who was the most destructive child of all.

I imagined how the Turk would have chattered as he led the others to the theatre to drag down the woman's rope, then back to the hotel and up to her room to put it round her neck and pull it tight.

Spiro described how they carried Del Roy down the fire escape and made a ladder of their own bodies round the lamp post, how they pulled her up to become the tallest man in the world.

Maxie had the best lawyer that Spiro could retain. I hired a leading psychiatrist who fought a two-day battle with the prosecution and won.

Maxie went to Broadmoor. Once a year I see him and we talk about the orange farm where the Dwarfs are waiting.

When they let Maxie out, I shall take him south. I hope he will be in time. Dwarfs do not make old bones.

I am sure of Spiro. His love will keep him alive.

I spent a fortnight with them last year. I no longer feel any repugnance for the Dwarfs. They are heartbroken children and Spiro is my friend.

★ ★ ★

L-EMENT OF RISK

When I teach people to drive I always warn them to remember that approaching them round the next corner is a steam roller without brakes being driven by a lunatic at fifty miles an hour on the wrong side of the road. If more people would remember that steam roller there would be fewer accidents.

C. R. WASON, *Busman's View*

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DESERT BREED

I am not ready to die, he thought

BY GEORGE RACKHAM

ON the morning of the second day, the vultures, planing in a circle, dropped to a lower altitude. One of the three swooped even lower, swinging in the same monotonous circle, close enough to be seen clearly, obscene against the sun.

Ahmed, lying in the sand and feeling the heat bearing on him like a solid weight, feeling the pain in his leg flowing up to the hip, groped for the empty water-bottle. He knew it was empty, all right. He tipped the bottle above what the sun had left of his lips, smelling the emptiness of it, and dropped it by his side.

I am not ready to die, he thought. But if this is my last day in the world, let me die with dignity.

"So this is how we finish," he said to the horse lying near him. "I could think of better ways."

The vulture's shadow passed across his face, and he watched the horse lying motionless in the sand.

Two days ago they had come from the west, spanking out of a village in a splatter of rifle fire, with the villagers hard behind them. It had started with a late-night game of cards in this strange village when Ahmed had realised that he was being cheated. Out came the knives, and one of the gamblers had fallen groaning and bloody to the ground.

Then it had begun.

The tall grey, tired after the four-day journey from his native Tuareg hills, had gone before them splendidly. They moved fast across the desert in a heat that can suck a man dry and leave his bones glaring in the sun; walking side by side in the bad places, cantering where it was good and, where the sand was hard-packed, moving into a gallop that ate the miles.

Towards evening, Ahmed reined in and dismounted. It's pitiful, he thought, seeing the dust-cloud that marked his pursuers a mile behind. If Moti had been fresh I would have lost them long ago. As it is . . .

The hills, the place of his own people, lay some eighty miles to the south, and the terrain between was murder.

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"We're both too young to die," he told the horse. "You'll have to move fast. Have strength, Moti! I've dreamt of racing you against the white man's horses before my twenty-first year. Have strength, my prince, for my dream."

He had wiped the horse's lips and nostrils, loosened the noseband that had never held a metal bit, and tipped the water-bottle, the horse holding up his head to receive the water, and remounted.

Then they were fired on.

One marksman ahead of the main party was calmly trying to pick him off from the top of a dune. Bullets whacked round them.

Something hit him in the lower right leg. He fell forward across the mane and grabbed the long hair, feeling the leg useless.

He sat up and sighted the rifle, not thinking of anything, seeing the man along the sights and having the sudden knowledge of the sights being true and of how it would be. He felt the trigger gently, and when the gun crashed once the man went down.

The horse plunged forward. He knew about the men in pursuit and his rider not gripping with the knees. The knowledge was an inspiration. He went all night, instinctively racing for home, a shadow in the moonlight with a man gripping his mane.

And in the morning the man, still less than conscious, felt the horse shudder and collapse into the sand.

There they stayed, not moving, the man and the horse.

Ahmed never knew when the vultures first came. They seemed an essential part of the situation.

Perhaps everybody has a vulture over his head, he thought. Mostly they wouldn't know about it. But when you're on your back for good, well, then you know, all right. You certainly know about your vultures then.

They stayed there that night, too. And in the morning they were still there, the vultures; and most of the time the horse looked at the man.

The dark bird banked in a tight circle, casting his shadow like a sign across the pair below, watching with hooded eyes, patient with specialised knowledge.

"Understand that I didn't know you were hit, too," Ahmed said. "A bullet through the belly is a degrading thing for my prince in trappings."

The bullet had opened the flesh in the soft under-part of the horse and come out the other side. He had lost a lot of blood.

Ahmed hooked his rifle towards him and eased the bolt. It was gritted up with sand. There was one round left.

"I'll face the vultures alone, my pearl. You can take only so much, and there's nothing left to give you except a quick death."

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The heat came like something solid. The stallion's eyes rolled. The man heard the thin scream of the bird as it swung into a tighter circle above the horse.

He sighted at a spot in the exact centre of the horse's forehead. The vulture wheeled hard, wings braking and tail fanning, poised, with the hooked beak thrusting down.

After being hit Ahmed had abandoned anger, hatred, dignity, in the face of these other things. Now, seeing the vultures planing down towards him, he felt not anger but shame. It would be weakness to kill the horse. To hell with weakness. To hell with the vultures.

He fired quickly. Even wounded and with grit in his rifle, he was as good as ever. The bird screamed once and skidded sideways into the sand. It left a long mark in the sand. The other two banked sharply and zoomed higher into the glare.

Ahmed flopped back, knowing what it is to be shot with a dumdum bullet, feeling the heat pulverise him.

He pulled all his willpower into his cheeks and grinned at the horse. " Be calm, now. We race against the white man another time in another place. When it is necessary I'll crawl close. A dagger can be used for many things . . ."

At first he thought it was his heart beating. But no! This was a constant, blurred beat. Horses moving in the sand. The sound came from far away.

And then he saw them coming fast, his father leading, and then they were around them erecting shades, and then he heard the sound of water.

" We heard a shot," the old man said. " We were searching for you, but in the wrong direction. The vultures climbing higher showed the way."

" The horse," Ahmed said. " He's shot in the belly."

His father's eyes glinted with pride. He knew something of the story of courage. " He will live to sire me many fine foals. Truly he has the heart of a lion."

" Blessed is Allah," Ahmed said, feeling sick with his leg and riding the pain, holding it.

He grinned at the horse. The stallion, his mouth and nostrils dripping with water and with water on his neck, raised his head and looked at the man.

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IN THE MINK

The only substantial body of babies wearing mink headgear are baby mink.

J. E. S. SIMON, *Financial Secretary to the Treasury*

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Who hath brought the fatal engine in?

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Titus Andronicus*

The buzz-saw, screeching as it cut
Its way through pine-planks, filled the hut
With such a tearing din,
He heard no footfall on the sill,
And not an inkling had, until
The belt snapped and the blade stood still,
A stranger had come in . . .

But, as he dodged the flying belt,
Side-stepping, a soft touch he felt
On his left shoulderblade;
And, turning, looked with mute surprise
Into unknown green-shadowed eyes,
The colour of a pond that lies
Deep in a forest glade.

Dark eyes that held no daylight gleam
Looked into his; and in a dream
With icing blood he stood;
As in the presence, looming there
With cloudy plumes of pine-dark hair,
He recognised with cold despair
The spirit of the wood—

The spirit of the wood that he
For years had ravished, tree by tree,
To feed his ravening mill:
And, as she turned with sighing stir,
Unquestioning, the old forester
With halting footsteps followed her
Over the darkening sill.

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON, *The Forester*

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That's the Drill

Whoever invented the pneumatic drill was a black magician in the first flight. He might, as he loosed the thing on the world, have shouted gleefully, as Prospero did to *his* Caliban, "Hag-seed, I'll make thee roar, that beasts shall tremble at thy din." Never did so small a gadget have a more fearful voice. It is raised in every other street. At its command, office windows tremble, and executives in conference cannot make themselves heard. Lying in bed in the morning with half an hour still to go, you are relentlessly roused from a quarter of a mile off.

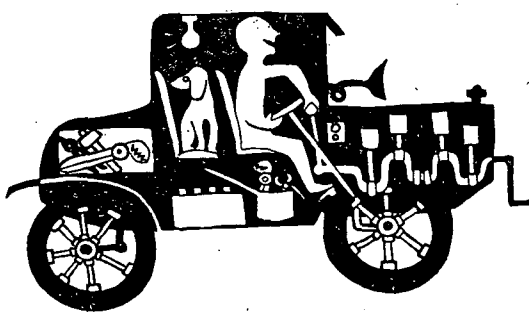
It would be perverse to point out that, if our ancestors in their sailing ships had made a landfall in a South Sea island and heard a pneumatic drill at work, they would have assumed that the natives worshipped an unusually revolting idol. All the same, it will be nice if, when we make our landfall on the moon, we find the mooncalves prodding their craters with a noiseless drill.

Two Tunes on a Drill, Times 4th Leader

Simple Mechanism

[He] used all his motors for canvassing voters,
and twenty telephones;
Besides a dandy little machine,
Cunning and neat as ever was seen
With a hundred pulleys and cranks between,
Made of metal and kept quite clean,
To hoist him out of his healthful bed
on every day of his life.
And wash him and brush him, and shave him and
dress him to live the Simple Life.

G. K. CHESTERTON, *The Good Rich Man*



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RUN OF THE DEER

BY ROBERT BLAKE

WHEN the train reached Lahore the worst of the afternoon heat was over, and the dead man in the top bunk was rolling from side to side with a steady, regular motion in time with the movement of the train. With the shutters across the compartment windows to keep out the sun there was not much light, but I could see the shadow he made in the berth above me, and one of his arms had slipped over the edge of the bunk and hung straight down, swinging gently, like a pendulum—a white silk and drill-sleeved pendulum that ended in a small hand with neat, blue nails . . .

As we passed the points outside the signal-box east of the junction I wasn't sorry to hear the wheels locking and slipping as the brakes went on. I put the empty whisky bottle out of sight beneath the bunk, and soon the coaches stopped banging together. For a moment everything was quiet. Then the noise started again, only this time with people shouting, and presently someone began knocking on the carriage door.

I said, " Kya hai? "

A voice answered in Central Province Hindi, " The bearer, Maburraq Khan sahib's bearer. And we are arrived in Lahore."

I put my legs over the side of my bunk and took a last look at Maburraq Khan. He'd been a rather handsome, well-to-do Mohammedan of about forty, and apart from the blood that had soaked into his pillow from the wound in the top of his head he might have been asleep. There was a neat, round hole in the wooden window shutter just behind him. The bullet had come through it, and now the sun lit up the hole like a star.

Outside on the platform the bearer was still saying, " It is Lahore. Open the door quickly, sahib. We are arrived in Lahore . . ."

You and I, I wanted to tell him, but not Maburraq Khan. Of

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him, only twelve stone or so of this earth's dust had arrived on platform four, while the rest of him was probably rowed halfway across the final river by now. If he'd died slowly, I thought, I might have whispered in his ear the last, quick repetition of the Names of God, but the bullet that had come singing through the window had killed him instantly. I reached out and straightened the sheet below his face.

" Listen," I said to the bearer outside the door, " your sahib is not well. Go and find a police inspector."

" A doctor? "

" No, not a doctor. A policeman. An officer-policeman. And hurry."

I heard his footsteps going away. There wasn't anything left to drink, so I sat down on the edge of the bunk and lit a cigarette. Just for a moment it seemed strange that outside the carriage door there would be the same, familiar Victorian Gothic arches holding up the roof, the same clouds of smoke, and platforms covered with the peasantry of the Punjab, sleeping and eating and carrying on a little business on the grey stone while they waited for the train that was due the day after tomorrow. Coolies with numbered

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badges. Men with copper braziers on their heads who sold milk. Soldiers on leave. Whores on business. Goats and bedding rolls. A money-lender sitting in the shade with no socks, his suspenders round his knees . . .

I sat there telling myself that there was nothing to worry about now that I was back. That the sounds outside, the sounds I had not heard for ten years, were the ones I'd grown up with; and that, so far as anyone had a country, this country was mine. I was home again, and every day I'd belong a little more to the dull brown landscape.

Every day England and Alison, and all the things that went with Alison—our ill-starred marriage, our estrangement, and the tragedy of her fatal car smash—seemed a little more remote, until perhaps a morning would come when I'd have forgotten so much that none of it would really matter any more.

Out on the platform, feet stamped up to the carriage door. Someone hammered at it with what sounded like a cane.

"Who is it?"

"The police inspector. You will please open."

I opened. The sunlight hit me like a moving wall; so I stepped backwards and half shut my eyes. That way I could see there was a native inspector looking dapper and efficient in his khaki uniform with the silver stars and his last war medal ribbons and his revolver. He looked satisfactorily like a man who had started out on a job and was probably going to do it, even if it meant dealing with a pink and slightly overweight Englishman who, after two days and nights in a train, probably looked as unsavoury as he felt.

The inspector said politely, "Good afternoon. What is the trouble?"

My eyes and the sun seemed to be working together a little better. Perhaps over-carefully I walked down the steps from the compartment until I stood beside the inspector and his three constables on the platform. Then I spoke to them.

"The top bunk. And there's no hurry. He's quite dead."

"So." The little inspector pulled himself up into the coupé.

Left to themselves his trio of constables hawked and spat and rested the butts of their rifles on the ground. Behind us, people were shouting at each other in Punjabi because somebody had lost a goat. The dead man's bearer was wringing his hands, surrounded by a rapidly-growing crowd. Finally, there was a flurry round the carriage and the inspector came out. He called to a couple of constables to take his place, came over to me with absolutely no expression on his face, and waited while I lit another cigarette. Finally he said, "You are Major Peter Wykes."

"Peter Wykes. 'Major' was painted on that bedding-roll during the war."

He nodded. "Very well. What happened?"

I told him.

"Did you know the dead man?"

I shook my head. "No," I said, "I didn't know him. We

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shared the coupé up from Bombay, and we talked a bit. He asked me if he could borrow an English magazine I'd been reading, and I passed it to him. That's all."

The policeman handed me a motoring paper. "Is that the one?"

I took it. "Yes." Then, when he didn't say anything, "An accident?"

He looked at me. He had very dark brown eyes that reminded me of a large and more than usually intelligent dog. Finally he said, "Why not?"

"It seems the most likely explanation. There are always peasants firing off guns all over the countryside."

"Yes," the inspector agreed. "And wandering Sikhs who want to start a small war." He pulled a notebook out of his pocket and wrote in it. "You will be staying in Lahore?"

"Yes."

"Doubtless on business."

"Yes." The sun was beating down on my back and making me feel slightly sick. "Jehan Arbad Khan and Company, Importers. They've offices in Old Fort Square."

"That is so." The inspector's eyes were looking past me to where the constables were carrying a blanket-covered shape out of the train. "You are knowing Mr. Arbad Khan?"

"Yes," I said, "I know him."

"Doubtless you will not have heard that he has disappeared?"

Then I knew that the sun was too hot. I moved across until I was in the shade of the station roof. It felt cooler there, but I could feel the sweat soaking through my shirt and sticking it to my back. I was surprised to find my voice so steady when I said, "What exactly do you mean by disappeared?"

"What indeed, Major Wykes?" The inspector shrugged his shoulders. "But that is a question one always asks oneself at these times. I think, Major, that it depends on why he disappears in the first place. He may find it expedient to disappear, in which case he will go where his money or his woman is, or perhaps where his enemies are not . . ."

"And which," I asked him, "would you say was the case with my friend, Jehan Arbad Khan?"

"Your friend?"

"For many years."

"I don't know," the inspector said. "Truly, Major, I do not know. Daily we are seeking for clues. But he has gone. Personally, I do not think we shall see him again." Then, as if sensing my doubts, he said a little wearily, "How well do you know this country, Major Wykes?"

I said, "I've lived in it for the best part of thirty-five years."

I looked away from him. Beyond the station roofs the tenement houses were shimmering white in the sun, while closer to us the familiar lean, coffee-brown, Punjabi faces stared curiously.

The thought occurred to me that my father had known men who

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looked and talked exactly as these did, and so had his father and his father's father before him. The men of Lahore hadn't changed in a hundred and fifty years.

The inspector said simply, " Don't take my word for it. Go and telephone."

I walked over to the crowded entrance hall of the station, found myself a telephone, and rang Jehan's office. When someone lifted the instrument at the other end I said, " May I please speak to Mr. Arbad Khan? "

There was a moment's silence, and then the voice said, " Mr. Arbad Khan is not here."

" When will he be back? "

It sounded as though someone was doing his best to make up his mind how to handle the situation. Finally, the voice said, " We do not know. Perhaps this week. Perhaps not."

Something or somebody was bound to throw some light on the situation, I told myself. And even as I did so another part of my brain reminded me that unless that something or somebody was quick about it, I should probably go hungry, because thirty rupees —all the money I had in the world—would hardly keep me in food for more than a couple of days . . .

" Look," I said into the telephone, " my name is Wykes. Major Peter Wykes. I've just arrived from England. Mr. Arbad Khan was expecting me."

The disembodied voice I was talking to said unemotionally, " I am truly sorry, sir. But Mr. Arbad Khan left me no message behind him."

" But I've come a long way to see Mr. Arbad Khan. You must have some idea where he is."

The man at the other end of the line was not to be drawn. He said, " I am not knowing any more, sir. We have spoken to Mr. Arbad Khan's house. He is not there."

The inspector had been right. I walked back to him and said so.

He shut his notebook with a snap and put it away in his pocket, saying formally, " It has given me much happiness to make your acquaintance."

" A happiness which I have shared."

I turned to go. A coolie picked up my luggage, and I walked from the station, into the flat, searing heat of the road outside.

" Tonga, huzoor? " I nodded. The coolie and the driver piled my luggage precariously across the back-to-back seats of the ponycart, and waited while I pulled myself aboard.

When we got to the hotel, I sat for a moment looking at the long, low, white-washed building without enthusiasm. I'd never liked it much, and at that particular moment I liked it even less. But there was nowhere else to go that was likely to be much cheaper. In the end, I alighted from the tonga just as a taxi crunched to a stop half a dozen yards away, and a girl got out.

I saw at once that she was more than usually tall, with deep

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chestnut-red hair and a white dress. I also saw that she moved beautifully in the moment that remained before a pockmarked youngster of sixteen or so vaulted over the boot of the taxi, threw a handful of leaflets in the girl's suddenly-frightened face, and screamed, " Pakistan zindabad! "

I found myself running forward almost before the words were out of his mouth, but even so he was too quick for me. He ducked back the way he had come, badly-printed leaflets drifting to the ground behind him.

The girl, white-faced, leaned against the car and stared wide-eyed at me. Seen at close quarters she was distinctly good-looking in a definite, clean-featured way, with a small, straight nose and a red, mobile mouth that was slightly too big for real beauty.

Her skin was tanned just enough to be attractive, and beneath the thin cotton of her dress her body was lean and yet suddenly and disturbingly feminine. As she turned, the material of her dress tightened suddenly across her breasts; and the moment seemed to last for ever as I became aware of her, not as a frightened stranger, but a woman who was flesh and blood, who could be spoken to, who could sometimes lie in a man's arms. Our eyes met, and I knew that she had sensed what I was thinking as quickly as I had realised my feelings. I felt a sudden surge of relief as I saw her mouth twitch with amusement.

Abruptly she asked, " What was all that about? " Her voice was low and better-class American.

" I'm sorry," I told her. " I'm afraid it was just part of the student lunatic fringe."

" Oh." She straightened and regarded me steadily. " What did he say? "

" Roughly, ' Up Pakistan.' " I took a leaflet and glanced at it. The words, badly printed and smudgy with wet ink, said the same intensely nationalistic things that students had been saying for years. " Apparently nobody's informed him that he's eight years out of date," I told her. " England's gone home. Nobody's trying to do his country out of anything—"

I broke off because the usual small crowd of loafers had gathered, and I heard someone saying enthusiastically that the sahib had promised the woman he would cut the boy's heart out when he had the chance.

I opened my mouth to tell him not to be a liar, then changed my mind. At that moment I had no desire to talk to a crowd when I could equally well talk to the girl.

" Back in 1947 you couldn't walk down any street in India without having a crowd of students shouting slogans at you." I took her by the arm and led her into the hotel. " You Americans must get used to the white man's burden."

She said, " Now you're laughing at me."

" Only a little." The clerk behind the reception desk was eyeing me, so I excused myself and ordered a room before suggesting to the girl that we might have a drink.

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"You can't." She looked at me without surprise and without amusement. "It's like America in the twenties. Prohibition. Unless you've a special licence, that is."

"Of course. I forgot."

I led her into a deserted lounge and called the nearest bearer. He was a big, bearded Poonchi of the kind that had been husband to my ayah. A lot of the dialect I had picked up then had stuck, so I asked him in Poonch Punjabi what sort of arrangements he could make to get us a drink. He didn't say anything, but went away and came back two minutes later with a siphon and two large glasses of whisky.

"Say when."

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "I didn't realise you really knew the country." She studied me over the top of her glass. "Army?"

"Yes."

"I can't make very intelligent conversation about these things. To me everyone in the Indian Army was in the Bengal Lancers. Tell me what you were in."

I drank a little whisky and it tasted wonderful. When the glass was back on the table again, I said, "They're called something else now, but when I first joined the regiment was called the Fourteenth Bengal Cavalry or Wykes Horse. So you're right this time."

"Yes." She smiled. "Who was Wykes?"

"My great-grandfather."

She didn't reply for what seemed quite a long time. Then she said slowly, "So it really happened. Father and son. All that sort of thing."

"Yes," I told her. "It happened, all right. Great-grandfather Wykes wore a top hat and a frock coat and kept a harem. Grandfather Wykes had his head blown off by his own men in the Mutiny. Father Wykes was Captain of the Viceroy's bodyguard. This Wykes—" I signalled the bearer who brought us two more filled glasses without being asked—"this Wykes saw the whole bloody thing fizzle out."

Conversationally she said, "Is that why you drink?"

I looked at her, and she stared back at me. She had an air of composure that was impressive without being offensive.

"No," I said, "that's a different story."

"Then why have you come back?"

"Because someone here offered me a job." And then, to show her that she wasn't the only one who could ask questions, "What about you?"

"I'm a little inevitable these days, I'm afraid. My name's Sara Garrard. I'm writing a series of special articles for a magazine. The East Today, Eight Years of Self-government. You know the sort of thing."

"Forgive my asking," I said, "but do you know anything about this part of the world?"

She shook her head. "No."

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" You take it for granted that the trained eye that detects the drunkard will also uncover the undercurrents of eastern politics."

Sara Garrard said equably, " I didn't say you were an alcoholic. I said you drank, which is perfectly true."

Curiously I wasn't angry. Instead I asked her how she knew.

" The way you looked at that glass of whisky when it was brought."

I said, " You sound very clinical about it."

She shrugged her shoulders. " In my business you see it often enough. Only—"

" Only what? "

" Only, sometimes it seems a pity."

Beyond the windows I could hear the rattle of the passing tongas and the long, high wail of Indian music from a nearby house where someone was playing the gramophone.

At last I said, " As it's only a matter of days before I shall be unable to afford to eat, let alone drink, the problem doesn't arise."

" I thought you said you'd got a job? "

" Technically, I have. In practice, I'm unemployed." There didn't seem any reason why I shouldn't tell her. " An old friend of mine, Jehan Arbad Khan, who used to be an officer in my regiment, told me that if I'd come out here he'd always have work for me with him. Now that I've arrived he's disappeared."

She stared at me in surprise. " You mean his firm's gone—or he has? "

" He has. And as the arrangement we had was purely informal, I now find myself unemployed."

" So what'll you do? "

" At the moment," I confessed, " I haven't the faintest idea."

" I'll give you a job, if that's what you want," Sara Garrard offered.

I shook my head. " That's nice of you, but I'm no journalist. Forget it."

" I don't want you to write anything. I want you as a guide."

" To where? "

" For a start," Sara said, " to Kashmir. I'm going there by camel caravan."

" You and who else? "

She shrugged her shoulders. " Nobody else European, if that's what you mean. I'm going to write about the people there."

I felt in my pocket for my packet of cigarettes, trying to imagine the girl in front of me living for weeks with the sort of people who drive camels in the north of India. I asked, " Just as a matter of curiosity, how did you find the camel caravan? "

" I met a man in the bazaar who said he knew where people started for Kashmir. He took me there and introduced me to the head of the caravan."

" And he agreed to take you? "

" He did. It cost plenty, but in the end he saw it my way."

" You just can't do that sort of thing out here. Journalistic

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enterprise is one thing. The way you're going about it, you'll end with your throat cut." Feeling suddenly irritated I went on, "Why the hell can't you go to Kashmir the same way as everyone else, anyway?"

She said flatly, "Because I want to see more of the country than the view from a first-class railway carriage. If you've no objections."

"No," I said. "I've no objections at all." At the back of my mind the conviction was forming that there might be worse jobs than acting as escort to Sara Garrard. Worse jobs by far. "Look," I suggested, "if I do agree to come with you on this trip, what sort of terms have you in mind?"

She said without hesitation, "Engagement for the journey there and back, the agreement to be breakable on my side but not on yours. And I'll pay you a hundred rupees a day. It's an expense the paper expected and is quite willing to pay. Maybe you'd better take it while it's going."

It was a point. I said, "Maybe I had."

Sara Garrard lit herself a cigarette and looked up at me. "That's fixed, then. You like the money. What else do you want to check before you'll come?"

"I'd better have the name of the fellow you made the deal with."

"Oh yes, I suppose you had." She slipped her hand in her pocket and produced an old envelope. "I made a note of it. Mohammed Ali Beg. Right?"

"Right," I said. It was already growing dark, the quick dusk dropping down over the buildings like a cloud, the pink light from the last of the sun tingeing the tops of the trees. "I shan't be long."

She looked at me, and I think she smiled with her eyes. But she didn't say anything. Her hands were at rest on the table in front of her and her whole attitude seemed to be one of extraordinary confidence and calm.

I went outside quickly and caught a tonga to the Kashmir serai.

As a child I'd known the big, mud-walled square of the serai like the back of my hand, for the ayah whose job it was to take me for walks enjoyed a number of spirited friendships with the flotsam of the northern traders who gathered there to rest their camels, meet old friends, and sell whatever it was that they had brought down from Kashmir, from Gilgit beyond the passes and the then still approachable tablelands of Tibet.

As I went through the gateway, wide enough to take two laden camels abreast, the fires were beginning to show beyond the shadows, and the hangers-on of the camel trains were gathering for their evening meal. I stopped a horse boy and asked for Mohammed Ali Beg. He pointed to a group arguing over a roll of carpets.

As I stepped into the flicker of light thrown by the nearest fire, the talk stopped. I said, "Mohammed Ali Beg?"

Without waiting for the answer, I knew instinctively that he would be the middle one. He wore an old pair of grey flannels

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pushed into the top of European riding boots, and a leather waistcoat. He wore neither turban nor hat.

I said in Pushtu, " May you never be tired."

" May you never be poor." He could not have been anything but a Pathan, even if he'd been wearing full evening dress. His hair was lank, black, and brushed flat against his head, with the parting up the middle. He would have looked like a Victorian playboy if it hadn't been for the great beak of a nose and the dark, cold eyes staring out of the narrow face. Typical eyes from somewhere up the Tochi. Proud, brave, faithless, cruel.

" An American sahiba has paid to be taken along with you to Kashmir." I made it a statement rather than a question and hoped that it would succeed. To push the point home that I didn't expect to be told the usual eastern story, I added, " She would have paid you well. How much? "

Ali Beg answered, " Five hundred rupees." Not a muscle of his face moved.

" I'm coming, too."

" Another five hundred."

" No," I said. " Not another five hundred. I shall look after myself. Also after the sahiba." There was silence.

" Look," I said, " I'll pay a hundred rupees extra for myself. Six hundred rupees in all. And the woman and I travel on horses."

Ali Beg wasn't a Pathan for nothing. He said, " Truly I can get them. Good horses and cheap."

" Perhaps, but later." I dropped down on to the bales of carpets and lit a cigarette. " Why do you go to Kashmir? "

Ali Beg shrugged his narrow shoulders. " A few rugs. Wool. Such stuff as you find in bazaars."

" And you take? "

" Clothes. Many clothes. For the soldiers, you understand."

I didn't say anything. It was quiet at the serai if you discounted the coughing and grunting of camels and the low, meaningless hum of conversations in half a dozen languages over the smoky fires. I told myself that with the fighting still going on over the disputed territories round Srinagar, it was natural enough that men like Ali Beg should take the opportunity of selling clothing to the scattered troops before the winter came.

I looked at the three men in front of me, and over the years came the memory of another time when I'd faced three such men and they had answered me in exactly that tone of voice. I'd been a subaltern then, duty patrolling the Khyber below Kohat, with the knowledge that in all probability the very hawks flying overhead were carrying a few rounds of forbidden ammunition or the bolt of a stolen rifle. In those days Jehan used to tell me that I had developed something of the sixth sense that prompts a Customs man to examine the luggage of one cross-Channel passenger and not another. A sixth sense that was not so much an extra eye as an awareness that one was being fooled.

I had an uncomfortable feeling that I was being fooled now.

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"About this clothing—"

Ali Beg said, "It's very poor stuff. The sort of thing soldiers wear off duty. But warm. Very warm."

I prodded one of the bales at my feet. It was wrapped in sacking, lengthwise, and wound with ropes in such a way that it would sling conveniently alongside a camel's kajawah. But it looked a light load for a pack camel. Too light. "You'll stay a poor man if you load a strong camel as light as that."

The Pathan shrugged his shoulders. "A fair load, sahib. A fair load."

"For a very small camel. Or perhaps a large man." I got to my feet and had my hands round the long bundle before any of the three realised what I was doing. I had it off the ground before they so much as moved, swinging it up on end as though I was tossing the caber, and letting it go. It fell on one end. From the sacking-wrapped parcel came a hard, metallic crash.

"All right, Ali Beg," I said. "What are they?"

For a long moment we stared at each other. "Rifles or sten guns?" I demanded.

With the air of a man taking a long chance, Ali Beg said, "Both."

"From where were they stolen and to where are they going?"

Ali Beg bared his wolf's teeth, and said shortly that they would be going to someone who would know how to use them.

I cursed him then, fluently and at length, with the wonderful wealth of perverted invention that invective gains in Pushtu. I traced his line through three generations of bestial couplings, remembering to avoid the things that could be answered only by a knife in the back, and getting a certain satisfaction from the appalling, liquid flow of filth that in certain areas of the north is much admired.

As I paused for breath, Ali Beg said without rancour that I had studied my books hard since arriving in the country.

I said, "I was born and bred in Hind."

"And served with Pathans. Your honour did not pick such pearls from a mother's knee." He considered the matter.

Finally making up his mind, he said, "Listen, sahib, when the war starts—"

I asked carefully, "What war?"

Ali Beg said, "This war that is to come with these idolatrous bastards in Delhi."

"Why should there be war?"

The Pathan squatted down on his hams in the firelight, and the other two copied him. "Allah! Why should there be anything else? I tell you, sahib, if you had seen the things I have seen—"

"A Pathan can think of nothing but his arms up to his elbows in blood," I interrupted. "What things have you seen?"

"After the sahib-log left, and in Kashmir. After the regiments sailed from Bombay leaving everything Moslem to be butchered."

"Since when have Pathans been butchered by Hindus?"

Ali Beg spat again. "They were in 1947."

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I said, " When the British left there was to be a fair division of arms and equipment. All men knew that."

" And was it so divided? " Since we both knew big arsenals and ordnance factories were located in India and outside the borders of the new Pakistan, it must have been a hopelessly idealistic belief that it ever would be.

" Well, sahib? " Ali Beg asked.

" No," I said. " It wasn't divided."

" God be praised for at least this much straight talk. And Kashmir? "

" There isn't anything to be said about Kashmir, except that most of the people who live there are Moslem and they want to belong to Pakistan. It's as simple as that."

" You should have been born a Pathan." Ali Beg scratched his jaw reflectively.

" And the rifles? "

The man sitting opposite me said, " Since we are of one mind about this matter, they're stolen from a troop train in India. More than that I neither know nor care. In this matter I am but a camel. I carry but do not ask."

I said, " I've spent too many years of my life stopping bazaar work in guns to like it now."

Ali Beg shrugged his shoulders. " Then shut your eyes, sahib. I swear the guns shall travel with me, whether you come or no."

Quite obviously that was true, I thought. Nobody had asked me to play detective with Ali Beg's camel loads, and I was too sympathetic to Pakistan's side in Kashmir to feel guilty or even unduly pious about a little honest gun-running.

I stood up and stretched my legs. " We can forget the little matter of the guns, Ali Beg. When do we move off? "

" Tomorrow morning. Does the sahib wish for me to act in the matter of a horse? "

" Yes," I said. " You'd better get me a horse. One for Miss Garrard, too."

" Good," Ali Beg said. " Now we will drink tea."

When I got back to the hotel I cut through the garden.

There was a figure crouched in the grass at the foot of a tamarind tree, and the thought never entered my head that it was anyone other than the nightwatchman or one of the gardeners. I said good night to him but he didn't move, and then the moon came out from behind a cloud.

Although I had seen him only once before, I knew immediately that the face with the dead, staring eyes belonged to the young student who had run up to Sara and frightened her that afternoon. I felt my stomach lurch uncomfortably, and then I was down on my knees beside what was left of him. With the moon so bright, it might have been the middle of the day as I turned the body over.

His throat had been cut and he was quite dead. But, looking at the little huddle of stained clothes, it seemed that death when it

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came must have seemed the least of his worries. Under the thin, cotton shirt the slight back and chest had been almost cut to pieces with a whip. Here and there the skin had not broken but was holding the patterned bruise of a plaited lash. Whoever had done the work had wasted his time cutting the boy's throat. After a beating like that, a buffalo would have died of shock.

I stood up slowly, feeling rather sick. Probably the whole business was political. Nobody would ever discover who had done it or even why, but I knew that for appearance' sake one would have to try. I went through the gardens and into the hotel by the side door. In the light of the corridor I saw that there was blood on my hands. I was glad that I hadn't gone through the main entrance and perhaps walked into Sara. Obviously I would have to tell the management, but it would hardly matter if I washed first.

The room was just as I had left it, my clothes over the backs of chairs. I walked across to the hand basin that stood against the far wall and turned the water on. As the basin filled I turned away, intending to slip out of my jacket and drop it on the bed.

But then I stopped. There was something on the plain cotton bedspread. For a moment I thought it was a big snake, and my mind jumped instinctively to the whereabouts of the nearest gun. And then I saw that the thing on the bed wasn't a snake at all. It was a yard-long, plaited-leather whip with a chain at one end. The leather looked damp, and I knew without investigating any closer that the stain on the cotton beneath it was blood.

I stood staring down at the whip for some time before the thing made any sense at all. Then I went and knocked on Sara's door.

"What's the matter?" She hadn't changed her dress. She was working. There was a portable typewriter open on the table by the side of her bed, and a neat pile of manuscripts.

I said, "I'm sorry, but it looks like trouble."

She didn't move. "Who for?"

"Principally for me." I went to her window and looked out over the Mall. "The boy who ran out at you this afternoon. He's dead. Somebody beat the hide off him, and then cut his throat."

"Oh." Sara was sitting very still now. I could see a hazy blur of her reflection in the glass of the window, and though I couldn't see her face I knew she was looking at me. After a while she asked, "Why are you so worried?"

"Because, the way things stand at the moment, it looks as though I did it."

Sara said stubbornly, "But—you've only just come back into the country. Nobody can have anything against you this early." Then she saw the look on my face and shrugged her shoulders. "All right. Maybe they can. What do you want to do?"

It was a fair question, I thought. What did I want to do? My thoughts went back to the dead man in the top bunk on the train.

Perhaps, after all, it had not been he who had been supposed to die.

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I said, " I'm going to talk Ali Beg into moving tonight. You'd better pack, if you want your conducted tour to Kashmir."

" All right, I'll come."

" Good," I said. But I didn't really mean it.

We got out of the hotel by climbing through the ground-floor windows. I went first and Sara passed me her bedding-roll and a zip bag.

" What about the rest? " I asked.

" There isn't any." She was sitting on the sill of the window, looking pale and slightly unreal in the moonlight. " I'm leaving it in my room. I can always collect it when we get back."

We found Ali Beg involved in a deal with a blue-eyed Afridi. He saw me when I was a dozen yards away, showed no surprise, and got rid of the Afridi as quickly as he could.

" How soon can you move? " I asked him.

The Pathan looked at me. " It's late, sahib. The men are ready for rest."

" They can sleep some other time. I'll pay two hundred rupees if we move tonight."

He should have driven me up from there, but for some reason he didn't. He merely shrugged his shoulders. " As to the matter of the horse—"

" Two horses."

" I have two. Kabulis. But the price—"

I said hastily, " We'll wait till later to talk about the price. For the moment we wish to join with you and be on our way."

Ali Beg turned back to his companions. We listened to a string of orders, and then he yelled to the men sleeping by the fire, " Up, bastards! Up and make ready to ride! "

We were on the road by dawn. And we stayed on the road for most of the next ten days . . .

I'd stopped worrying by the time we got to that dusty, mud-walled, desolate little place, Gujar Khan. We had put Lahore two hundred miles behind us, and all the things that I was sure were going to happen hadn't.

For the first two days I'd wondered about Sara, but as time passed I realised that there wasn't any need to worry about her, either. She could ride a horse, and if she was ever tired she took care not to show it. She wrote, took photographs, and asked questions of anyone who could understand her.

I am convinced Ali Beg thought she was mad.

We stayed the night outside the walls at Gujar Khan because there was plenty of water and a strip of trees running beside it.

And in the morning we were no longer alone.

There was nothing about the dozen extra men round the camp that suggested anything out of the ordinary. I woke up and found they were there: Afghans with a sprinkling of Pathans, and a score of flea-bitten horses tethered alongside the camels. I asked the

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nearest of Ali Beg's men who they were, and he said they were horse-dealers going south towards Delhi. Ali Beg knew some of them and they were drinking tea together. That was all.

The man who seemed to be the leader of the strangers was a tall, young, and rather beautiful Pathan, with a rose stuck in the side of his black hair. As he came lounging across from the edge of the fire, I was aware of his lithe, easy movement and saw with surprise that he was broad-shouldered and gave a strange, effortless impression of strength. He approached me and I greeted him, "May you never be tired."

"Or you poor." He leaned against his horse and studied me expressionlessly.

I looked at Ali Beg. "There was no talk of trading on the way," I said. "The sahiba and I wish to get to Kashmir."

"We have met with horse-dealers from Kashmir. We shall stay here for some time and sell horses," Ali Beg said, "because of—"

"The sahiba and I cannot be hindered," I interrupted angrily. "Some arrangement must be made . . ."

Before Ali Beg could reply, the young Pathan had drawn him aside out of carshot, speaking rapidly with an insolent ease of manner. They seemed to come quickly to some agreement for Ali Beg turned back to me saying, "Mohammed Yusuf—" he indicated the young Pathan beside him—"is willing to ride ahead with you. He will accompany you and the sahiba. When you come to Srinagar, Mohammed Yusuf has business there."

"All right." I didn't believe it and I didn't much like it. But Sara said eagerly, "When can we leave?"

"Mohammed Yusuf is ready. When my lord pleases he can go."

"Very well," I said. "In half an hour."

Mohammed Yusuf led us out. He looked younger and bigger and, if possible, more beautiful than ever. The fresh dogrose behind his ear and his yellow waistcoat looked wonderful in the morning sun.

Sara and I mounted, and rode after him.

As we turned at the end of the little huddle of trees I looked back at Ali Beg and the camels and the men. They were grouped round the camp fires; the smoke was rising lazily. Two of the camels were drinking down at the river, and the rest wore that odd, remote look that camels get when they're half asleep.

Then the trees hid them and we were on the road again, heading north towards the ragged line of the hills.

At my side Sara said briefly, "How far is it to Srinagar?"

"About a hundred miles." I stared ahead at the distant snow-line. "Maybe a bit less."

I glanced at her. The dust had settled round her face like a mask, and the backs of her bare arms looked as though they'd been covered with kaolin clay. If she was tired, she certainly didn't show it.

I wondered how many of the girls I'd known in India in the

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old days could have ridden so far under such conditions. I tried to imagine Alison in her place, and I found that for the first time I couldn't picture her. All I could remember was her body and her voice—and suddenly that last desperate scene in our London flat came back to me. I could see Alison wearing that loose scarf thing tucked into the top of her blouse and, once again, I lived that terrible, casual moment when—without knowing quite why—I'd reached out to push the thing down. She turned to try to stop me, but the scarf came away in my hand, and I could see the mark properly. The skin of her neck was very white, and whoever had bitten her there had bruised her badly.

And then Alison had laughed. It might have been sheer nerves. Whatever the reason, there was something obscene and disgusting about that laugh. In a spurt of anger, I slapped her across the face with my open palm. Whatever there had still been between us had ended suddenly, and was gone for ever.

For a couple of seconds she had stood there and stared at me, her eyes scared, the colour draining from her face. " You bloody little prig," she'd said, and turned and run out of the flat.

I'd crossed to the window and watched her car swing out wildly into the stream of traffic, and thought she was driving much too fast. That night the police told me that there was a line of black rubber a hundred yards long where her car had overshot a bend. When they found her she was already dead . . .

Quite suddenly I felt very weary. We finished the day's journey in silence with the Pathan riding slightly ahead of us. We were both aware of an increasing mistrust and dislike of the insolent figure that rode so effortlessly. At each halt Mohammed Yusuf's manner had become more offhand—even offensive. Sara was plainly terrified of him.

" What do you suppose would happen," She asked me an hour later, " if we told Mohammed Yusuf that we didn't intend to go on to Kashmir, and wanted to turn back? "

The same question had been running through my mind for some time. Was it really chance that had led Yusuf to us, or could his insolence signify that he knew something of the reason for my hurried departure from Lahore? I knew beyond all doubt that it would be prudent—perhaps safer—to evade him, and somehow regain Ali Beg's protection, but what excuse or what means might be used was impossible to forecast, and I said so.

" If he knew we wanted to, he'd make damn sure we never got the chance."

We reached a small circle of trees and dismounted. The grass had the peculiar green that I remembered beside the occasional roadside pool. I could never understand how the dust failed to reach it and make it as parched as everything else. The trees were thick, and the shade they threw was dark and cold. There was no need to tether the horses because they wanted it all as much as we did. We dropped on the grass, and made a fire as the sun went below the hills.

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Sara lit a cigarette and propped her back against a tree. I went over to the fire to collect a couple of chappatis and some dal, and we ate together in the shadows beyond the fire as the darkness rolled up and the lights flickered from the walls of a village behind the trees. We didn't talk much. Once she asked me what I'd do when the trip was over.

"Look for a job."

"You'll stay out here?"

I couldn't see her face, but some reflected light from the fire touched the line of her throat and the open neck of her shirt. I wanted to reach out and touch it, just to prove that it was real, but I didn't. I said, "Yes."

"It doesn't—lose anything for you?"

"No," I told her, "it doesn't lose anything at all."

Mohammed Yusuf had rolled himself in his blanket and the flames of the fire died down. In the light from the stars I could see the horses and the open ground beyond and then the hard, baked mud of the village wall. There was an old, whitewashed shrine halfway up the path to the village which was probably the tomb of some local saint, because a couple of little oil lanterns burnt on either side of it, and there was a wreath of something dark against the stone where I guessed a garland had been laid.

Perhaps, I thought, my grandfather had a tomb like that. He'd looked after a district the size of Wales, somewhere in the hills. I'd never seen where the people he'd served had buried him, but I knew the chances were that his grave looked much the same as this. For all I knew the village women lit lamps beside him as well, and prayed to him, and didn't even know his name.

Sara broke in on my thoughts. "You think we ought to go back, don't you?" she said. "To Ali Beg, I mean. I'll come with you if you want it that way. You think we're in danger, don't you?"

There were jackals howling now, and the fire had burnt down to the last of the embers.

"Look," I said, "if we go, I don't know what will happen when Yusuf finds out."

She said practically, "Then he'd better not find out. Let's see what we can do about moving the horses."

They were easier to manage than I'd expected. The two we'd been riding, cropping nearest us, made no sound as we went up to them and started to lead them without a saddle. They hadn't any harness to creak and their hoofs made no sound on the grass and, if possible, even less on the dust of the road. I looked back at the patch of trees but Yusuf must have been asleep, because he didn't stir. We went on leading the horses, and only stopped when we'd gone about half a mile. Then we saddled them and started to ride back the way we'd come.

After a while Sara said, "Do we ride all night?"

I shook my head. "I don't think the horses would stand it. If we get off the road at Mittah Khan there's a track leading up to an old Dak bungalow in the trees. I've used it once or twice before."

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Sara looked at me. " What happens if Yusuf follows us? "

I said, hoping it was true, " He'll carry straight on. He won't reckon we've stopped. And, anyway, the chances are he won't be able to see a horse's track in the dark."

" There is that," Sara agreed. " There isn't much we can count on, but there is that."

I'd once heard a hill country proverb that said: *As the deer runs before the tiger, so man flees before man*, and I thought without much amusement that Mohammed Yusuf was very much the tiger and I the hunted deer—particularly with Sara alongside.

We went on down the pale, shadowy road. It was like riding in a dream because there wasn't a living thing on it besides ourselves, and the moon played tricks with its light shining through the occasional tree so that it seemed to shift and change. Most of the time we went at a steady canter, although now and then the land dropped away into a dried river bed and we had to walk.

A chill wind started to blow from the distant snow. Both of us were tired, but we knew we dared not stop. For all we knew he might have been half a mile behind us on the trail. Looking at Sara, I wished I knew just how bad it would be if we were caught and I couldn't talk my way out of it.

It was almost three o'clock when we came to the trees I'd remembered. Somewhere ahead of us was the village where we'd left Ali Beg, but there was no point in trying to get that far. The horses were desperately tired and I was practically asleep in the saddle. How Sara was standing it I just didn't know. I thought I could do with a drink, hot sweet tea, and for the first time I realised that I hadn't drunk anything else for a fortnight.

I called to Sara and pointed to a break in the road ahead. " There's a track up there on the right. That's where we go."

We pulled the horses on to it. As we breasted the hill the track flattened out. Soon we'd see the bungalow.

I said, " I used to come up here shooting."

" What were you shooting? " Sara asked. " Tiger? "

I laughed. " God, no. Jungli murghi, and quail."

" What's a jungli murghi? "

" It's a sort of a wild chicken that runs like hell." And I could see my father in his old, patched, bush jacket with the cartridge loops at the front for when he was using the big gun. I thought I'd forgotten the wonderful way he could swing his long Manton twelve-bore, but as the horses came out on the flat I hadn't forgotten, and it was as if he was walking in front of me, wearing chaplis instead of boots as he stole softly through the pine needles with me, and both of us loving it all . . .

Sara said, " There's water there," and we dismounted.

It was odd that I should forget the jheel, dipped down into the hollow on the high ground above the road, because we'd shot skeet that day as well as quail, and without the water there wouldn't have been skeet. It was a lonely and a beautiful jheel, not very large, but cold and clear, with the trees coming down to the edge,

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and the bungalow beyond the trees. The horses snorted at the smell of it, and we unsaddled, and let them drink.

" It's not real," Sara said.

In the shadows the trees looked black, and the moon had turned the surface of the water to silver.

Sara dropped down her bedding-roll and sat on it. " What do we do now? "

" Get on to the bungalow." I nodded towards the north of the water. " It should be somewhere over there."

She shook her head. " You go. I'm staying here."

It didn't take me long, but when I found it there wasn't much left. It was round-walled, like most of the early places, and thatched. Now I saw in the moonlight that the roof had fallen in and the shutters hung off empty windows. It was desolate and dead and forgotten. I could see it had been that way for years. I sat on a tree trunk, finishing my cigarette, and looked at it. The place was alone in the clearing in the moonlight, and it didn't seem right that I should go any nearer. It was a ruin; yet what it had been, I could remember. It was dead, and I felt that what I'd been was dead, too. I stood up, turned, and left.

I found myself walking more quickly as I reached the place where I'd left Sara. I crossed over to the shadow of the trees, and found her sitting on her bedding-roll, her shoulders bare above a towel. Little beads of water stood out on her face and her hair was combed back, looking dark and wet.

She said, " I've been for a swim."

" What's the water like? "

She laughed softly. " Cold as hell. Like a mountain stream."

I looked at her, wanting to say something else, but I couldn't. I sat down beside her and suddenly discovered that the arm I was leaning on was shaking.

Sara asked, " Could I have a cigarette? "

She'd tried to make it sound casual but her voice quivered a little, and she glanced up quickly to see if I'd noticed. I had. We just sat there and looked at each other. For me there was no bungalow beyond the jheel, no horses cropping a dozen yards away. There was no longer any yesterday or tomorrow. Only Sara, gazing at me, and the cold, damp grass beneath my hands.

I reached out and put my arms round her shoulders. My arms felt as heavy as lead, and I had to hold her tightly to stop them shaking. As I held her, she put her head back, and I kissed her eyes and her mouth and the long, smooth line of her throat till she caught her breath and laughed, and I asked her what was the matter.

" Darling," she said, " there's nothing the matter. I'm just a little scared."

" You don't have to be."

" I don't mind," she said. " I don't mind at all." She lifted her arms up to me. The towel slipped down. We both knew everything was going to be all right and we needn't talk any more.

Later, when I lit her cigarette for her, and put it between her

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lips, she took my hand and held it tightly, like a little girl. I looked down at her. Her face was quiet and her eyes were closed, and I thought of her as I'd seen her that first day, knowing that something had happened to me, but still not sure what it was.

She took my hand and put it against her breast. I could feel her heart beating. It was then I started to say something, but she opened her eyes and said, " No."

" No, what? "

" Look," Sara said, " you don't have to say you love me. It must be awful to have to say you love someone when you don't."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

She looked up at me and I bent to kiss her. She waited till I'd finished before she said, " Darling, I'm sorry if I'm not much good. It's just that it's the first time for me, that's all." She moved a little in my arms and shut her eyes. " Give me time, darling. I promise you I'll get better."

I said, " I'll try to see you get enough practice," but she didn't smile. After a few minutes I spoke to her again. She didn't answer, and I realised she was asleep. I pulled a blanket over her and stood up, and went to look at the horses. An hour before they'd been grazing a few yards away, but they must have wandered round the bank of the jheel because, although I could hear them, it wasn't possible to see them any more.

I started walking in the direction of the sound, and eventually

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discovered both horses nearly a quarter of a mile away. They stood quite still as I tethered them with a picket rope. A chill breeze blew up suddenly and I shivered. I walked most of the way back and then I stopped.

Somebody was watching me from beneath one of the tall trees. I stood staring at whoever it was for a while to make sure that it wasn't just another shadow. But it was no shadow.

I said, " Who's that? " and a voice answered in Pushtu.

" It is I."

As soon as he spoke I realised I had known all the time that it was Mohammed Yusuf.

He moved from the shadow of the tree towards me. He was still wearing a red rose behind his ear, and his bright yellow Bukhara waistcoat was undone. He seemed about seven feet high in the half light, tall and proud and as cruel as the devil.

I said softly, because I didn't want to waken Sara, " What do you want? "

" I want you, sahib," Mohammed Yusuf said.

He was holding his knife, not a gun. I'd noticed the knife earlier, ivory-handled, double-edged, and slightly curved towards the tip. I had no illusions about Pathans and knives. I stepped quietly behind a tree and, in the second in which he paused, came from the other side and grabbed his wrist.

I think I startled him. For a moment he did nothing, and then he whispered a word that meant I habitually slept with my sister.

I replied with an allegation of such unbelievable foulness that I think it almost shocked him.

Then he tried to move his arm.

I felt him brace his back, and I knew that he was stronger than I. He was a huge man and hard as iron, and I had so little chance of keeping my grip on his wrist that it was barely worth the effort of trying. Either way I had little time in which to decide. The feeling of his arm stiffening in my hold decided me. I twisted his wrist desperately, dragged it towards me, and fell.

I shall never know which of us was more surprised. Certainly I had no idea we were so near the bank. I fell back into air, Mohammed Yusuf with me. I could still see the moonlight glinting on his knife blade as we hung for an eternity in the air.

Even while we were falling I was telling myself that the water wasn't deep. As it closed over my head I kicked downwards and felt mud ooze over my foot. Then I let myself sink to the bottom with Yusuf on top of me.

I think the shallowness surprised him more than it did me, because when the mud pulled him up I heard him choke as he caught his breath. I wriggled sideways from under him and got my head above the surface again. He was still face downwards when I got there, but I'd had to let go his wrist. He cut sideways, recklessly, with the long knife and only just missed my leg.

I went for the arm again, and he twisted round and struggled to his knees, but his pugaree had fallen off and his long hair hung

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down over his eyes, blinding him. I gripped a handful of it and pulled him towards me, swinging my knee up so that it caught him under the jaw.

Quite suddenly I knew what to do, and there seemed all the time in the world to do it in. I stood where I was, watching the knife. It seemed all wrong that I should be able to move so fast, when the man in front of me moved so terribly slowly. I swayed back, and the knife carried on upwards, while I knocked the wrist sideways, turning until my back was to him and I was gripping with my other hand, bending his arm up and locking it, and at the same time letting myself fall . . .

He hit the water first this time. He hit it and went under, and I lay on his doubled-up arm, and bent my neck to keep my head above water. With my thirteen stone on his arm, he might as well have been caught by a man-trap.

I watched the ripples move across the jheel from where his legs were splashing and lap against the bank on the far side. A bird that had been nesting in the reeds rose heavily and flapped its way into the shadows. The chorus of the frogs sounded loud and almost unnaturally clear. Then the struggling stopped and the big body relaxed. For another minute I held him there, and then I stood looking down at him. I could see him quite clearly in the moonlight. Once I thought I saw him moving, but it was only the water lifting his long, black hair . . .

It was a long time since I'd killed a man. A long time to think back. During the war.

I waded out of the water, walked to my bedding-roll, and dried myself with a towel. Then I went over to Sara. She was still fast asleep. I pulled the blanket over her and returned to my own things. I lay down and looked at the stars shining through the trees. I was sure Mohammed Yusuf had followed us with murder as his fixed intent—and followed us alone. He would hardly have wanted a witness to the killing of a white man.

We reached Gujar Khan towards the end of the next afternoon. There weren't any camels or horses there. Only the cold camp fires, and a boy trying to lead a big Punjabi ram to the town. I asked him which way the caravan had gone, and he waved an arm westward, towards the road that led ultimately to Peshawar.

"Do you think they'll be keeping to that road?" asked Sara.

"They'll have to. It doesn't go anywhere else." I got the horses moving. "We'd better travel a few more miles tonight. If they're in that much of a hurry they're probably riding half the night. The chances are, they're ahead by about three days."

It didn't matter because they were a good three days. The old military road was almost empty, except for an occasional oxcart heading for market, and the air was crisp and dry at that time of the year. We rode steadily. When we found a place we liked, we wasted a couple of hours off the road during the heat of the day.

Outside the villages there were fruit orchards, and here and

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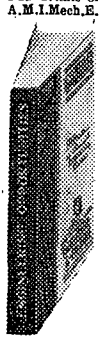

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there along the wide, lonely road the villages took on the look of outposts, freshly whitewashed or just left mud-brown. The air was so clear that the hills in the distance looked as though you could touch them, and like everything else they were brown.

"What are they called?" Sara asked.

"The beginning of the Hindu Kusch—the Hindu killing ground." I told her about the Tartar invasions in the old days.

She asked me about the people, and I told her of Timur, the Eastern Hun, and the long line of Mogul emperors, and Englishmen like Nicholson and Lawrence and Hodson. Once Sara smiled, and I asked her if I was being a bore.

"No," she said. "It's just that it's not history to you. All those people. They're real. They're here."

I looked ahead to where Rawalpindi showed, big and sprawling, a mile or so along the road. "At least Nicholson's here."

"Which one was he?"

"He was quite a man," I said. "He settled the North-west Frontier provinces about the time of the Sikh Wars. Used to hunt tigers with a sword. They say that if you listen at night in the pass at Margalla you can still hear the hoofbeats of the horse he rode to death at the battle of Ferozeshah."

She looked at me curiously. "Do you believe it?"

"No," I said, "I don't believe it. Nobody who died a hundred years ago is as close as all that."

Sara grinned.

"Maybe that's something, anyway. Do we stop at Rawalpindi?"

"We stop to have a decent meal and make a phone call," I said.

We stopped longer than that, because I wanted to ask in the bazaar about Ali Beg. When I rejoined Sara I said, "They left last night."

We collected the horses and rode on down the dusty road. The hills were all round us now, brown and bleak, and it was midday by the time we reached Margalla. Ahead of us I could see almost all there was of the road, as far as the end of the pass and the police post before Hasan Abdul. About a mile ahead of us was a drifting swirl of dust. The wind caught it, pushed it to one side, and showed the ungainly, lurching shape of a loaded camel.

Sara said, "There they are."

I didn't say anything, but kicked my horse into a canter, and we went down to meet them in the middle of the road.

They were halted when we got there. The camels and horses were hobbled and grazing at the short scrub grass, while the drivers hawked and spat and busied themselves drinking water or arguing over a chance-thrown dice. It looked exactly like a thousand other caravans, and as I got up to it I had a sudden and unreasoning fear that I was going to make a fool of myself.

We rode up through the lines of animals. The men squatting round them didn't look at us. The smell of the wood smoke from their fire hit one almost forcibly on the clear air. Ahead of the caravan I recognised Ali Beg standing talking to a man in a khaki

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bush jacket and riding breeches who had his back to me. I dismounted and led the horses over.

Ali Beg looked up.

I had never seen a Pathan show surprise before, and I was rather childishly pleased that Ali Beg did. His face didn't alter, but his eyes opened a little before they narrowed.

And then the other man turned round . . . He was a successful Mohammedan businessman, an ex-major of the Indian Army who for weeks had been officially dead because nobody had been able to find him in Lahore.

"Hullo, Peter," said Jehan Arbad Khan.

He hadn't changed very much. His once-stringy body had filled out a little, but the thin, high-cheekboned, hawk's face was the same. He stood watching me perfectly at his ease, his hands in his bush shirt pockets. One might have thought he was smiling, if it hadn't been for his eyes.

I said to him, "Hullo, Jehan. You're supposed to be dead."

"I know." He looked so very much a Pathan just then that it sounded odd to hear him speak quite such good English. With the bleak, dust-coloured face of the pass climbing up behind him, he fitted into the place much better than I did. It was his land, the people round him were his people.

Jehan looked at Ali Beg, and the man moved away. Then he said, "You shouldn't have come here, Peter."

"Perhaps neither of us should have come here." I dismounted and stood staring at him, my right hand still holding the reins. "I thought the time had gone for money to be made this way."

"What way?"

"Tribesmen and smuggled guns." I pointed to the camels. Suddenly the whole thing seemed rather futile. "I'd have thought you'd been on the other side often enough to have made a better job of it. Those rifles Ali Beg has brought you stick out a mile. You'll never get past the guards at the Khyber Pass."

"Yes, I shall," Jehan Arbad Khan said.

I looked away from him as I lit a cigarette, taking my time over it. "You seem very sure."

"I am sure. This week the post is manned by the 3rd/4th Frontier Rifles. They happen to be Pathans." For the first time he smiled. "You've known me long enough to realise this hasn't anything to do with money. Haven't you heard of Pushtunistan?"

I had, and all at once I wondered why I'd never thought of it before.

"Well?"

I said, "Only that it's a bazaar idea for a land of Pushtu-speaking people, that there should be a separate country north of Pakistan made up of the hill tribes. Pathans, Wazirs, Masuds . . ."

Jehan asked softly, "Why not?"

"Because for one thing the country isn't and couldn't ever be self-supporting. For the people you'd be dealing with, there'd be

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no roads or services or even elementary administration. The tribes would be a thousand times better off as part of Pakistan."

"And if they didn't have to turn to Pakistan?"

"Apart from Afghanistan there isn't anywhere else," I argued.

He looked at me stonily. "And what language do they speak in Afghanistan?"

"Pushtu, but—" I stopped then because I understood and I didn't like what I understood.

"But what?" Jehan asked.

"Only that if there was a country called Pushtunistan and it turned north instead of south for help, it would be merely a matter of time before it was swallowed up into Afghanistan. And as the northern part of that country is already practically part and parcel of the southern states of Russia, you'd have to wait just a couple of years before the U.S.S.R. were building airfields north of Peshawar."

"All the Pushtu-speaking people want is freedom," Jehan said. "To get it they'll turn where they can get the strongest friends."

"Look," I said, "if you've talked a company of thick-headed sepoys into letting you take a load of rifles and sten guns to the tribesmen, it isn't fun. It's not even murder. It's cold-bloodedly starting a war. You know what the Pathans are like."

Jehan showed his teeth.

"Of course, if only for the reason that I myself am a Pathan."

From the northern end of the pass a single truck was coming, stirring up the light brown dust with its wheels.

Behind me, Ali Beg was looking at it, too, because I heard his voice ask, "What's that?"

Half a dozen voices answered him. I heard one of them say something about it being the evening post lorry from Hasan Abdul. I tried to see it better over Jehan's shoulder.

"Well," I asked, "what happens now?"

Jehan looked down at his well-polished boots. "I'm sorry, Peter. I'm afraid it's what should have happened on the train."

I remembered the limp, dead arm hanging over the side of the bunk that had belonged to Maburraq Khan and said, "You mean the man in the top bunk was killed instead of me?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid so. It just shows what can happen to Mohammedan gentlemen who read English motoring papers."

So that had been it.

I remembered that the bullet had come from behind. Whoever had fired it wouldn't have been able to see his victim's face. He had assumed that a man was English if he was lying on a railway bunk reading an English magazine.

I said, "I'm sorry for Maburraq Khan."

"Was that his name? Doubtless he rests with God."

The truck was very near now, but nobody was paying it any attention. There was nothing about a camel caravan likely to interest the driver of the post truck, and even if I'd gone down on my knees in the middle of the road he wouldn't have stopped.

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And the chances were that it was just the post truck.

"Jehan," I said, "I want to talk about the girl."

Jehan studied me. Perhaps he was thinking of the years we'd spent together, or of his school in England. Or perhaps he was dreaming of his Pushtu Empire and the way things had been long years ago under Dost Mohammed Khan.

I said, "Listen, Jehan. The girl doesn't have to die."

He said absently, "Why not?"

The truck was almost abreast of us now. Ali Beg drew the corner of his pugaree across his mouth to shield it from the dust. The rest of the men turned away. I was the only one who actually watched it lurch up the road into the middle of us. It stopped.

Behind me, Ali Beg said, "What in the name of Allah—?"

He and everyone else could see why the truck had stopped. It had pulled up with its front off the road and the open rear facing us. We could see the dusty, khaki shirts of the troops inside and the last of the sun touching the barrels of the Bren guns.

The little police inspector from Lahore was standing between two of them with a submachine-gun in his hands, saying incongruously in English, "Now I say—nobody move."

Nobody moved.

The inspector caught my eye, and this time said in Pushtu, "All men will stay where they are. Those that run will die quickly."

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Jehan said to me quietly, " You knew? "

" I knew when I saw the knife in Yusuf's hand—the knife I had engraved for you when we passed out of Sandhurst. When I heard at Rawalpindi that the guns had come this way I was pretty sure. That was why I telephoned to Hasan Abdul."

He looked down the line of pack camels and back to the policemen in the truck.

And then without warning, he moved.

He moved so quickly that I didn't realise what was happening until he was behind me, and I was standing between him and the pointing Bren guns. I heard the sudden creak of leather as he pulled himself into the saddle of his waiting horse, dragged its head round, and kicked it into a great, standing jump towards the side of the truck.

I said instinctively, " Jehan, don't be a bloody fool—"

He wouldn't have heard me. There was a moment of helpless confusion in the truck as the men with the Bren guns realised too late that he was beyond their arc of fire. They stood up and tried to swing their weapons round, but they succeeded only in ramming their barrels into the chests of their companions who were trying to jump down to the ground.

Jehan reined round. In the last of the sunlight I saw the dull flash of a pistol barrel in his hand and heard the hard, echoing crack as he fired across his horse's neck at me. Then he was urging his horse round the front of the truck and breaking into a gallop, back along the way we had come.

I stood wondering why I wasn't feeling the punch of the bullet, and then experiencing a growing sense of wonder that he'd missed me. As I moved to my own horse, Sara coughed.

I'd forgotten she had been standing almost behind me. I turned. She was still upright against the side of her horse, holding on to the saddle with one hand while she held the other to her chest. She went on coughing, and I saw the blood suddenly spread from beneath her hand across the front of her shirt.

" Sara—" She looked at me, her face white.

As I reached her, she stopped coughing and whispered, " It's all right. Maybe I'd better sit down."

I saw the inspector at my side and together we laid her on the dusty ground. I took her hand away from her chest and unfastened her shirt. The bullet had entered high up and a little to one side. There was a lot of blood, but I'd seen plenty of wounds like it before, and thought that with any luck it would be all right. I glanced at the inspector and saw that he looked relieved.

I stood up and reached for Sara's horse.

I knew what I had to do and so did the inspector and the men who now stood in a circle round me. I held out my hand to the inspector. He hesitated for a moment, because his training said that whatever the crime the man must be taken alive if possible. But standing there among the hard, brown slopes of the hills there was not a man who would have disputed my right to blood feud.

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It was the way they thought and the way I thought, because I was a part of them and each man's honour was his own law.

"Give me thy gun, brother," I said.

The inspector handed me his pistol. It felt cold and heavy and familiar in my hand. I looked down at Sara and she shook her head.

"No," Sara said. "Wait."

I didn't answer and pulled myself up into the saddle. I saw Jehan riding hard across the rocky ground at the side of the road and said, "I can't wait."

Sara said hoarsely, "Listen, Peter. Don't look at me like that. These aren't your people. You're English—"

"These are my people," I said.

She coughed again and then said slowly, "Don't go, Peter—it's you I want. Not your ghost."

I spoke to the inspector. "Get her to a doctor."

"The blood debt is yours and night falls. Ride swiftly, brother," the inspector said.

I remembered the story of Nicholson's phantom horse in the pass and wondered how many of the inspector's men would have come with me. Not many, I decided. On the whole I was pleased. Jehan was my business. I wanted to follow him alone.

As I kicked the horse forward, Sara said something else, but the words were just a thin cry lost behind me, and then there was only the pass ahead and Jehan Arbad Khan at the end.

As I watched the dark shadow that was Jehan's mare I knew that it would take me farther than the end of the pass to catch him, with even the toughest Kabuli.

The dun he leaned against the bit
And slugged his head above
But the red mare played with the snaffle bars
As a maiden plays with a glove.

But this, I thought, was real life and not Kipling. I pushed the inspector's pistol into my pocket and eased myself farther forward on the glistening neck.

Ahead of me I could see Jehan quite clearly in the moonlight. He was riding well, his horse following a path of its own through the rocks and boulders.

I looked up at the ridge along the top of the pass and saw that the sky was now quite dark. The lower slopes were a deep blue shadow, and the moonlight made little pools of silver and white on the road. Over the drumming of the hoofbeats I could hear the jackals calling. The heat of the day was gone and it suddenly seemed very cold.

And then I sensed another horse behind me.

I thought that one of the policemen must have followed me after all. Listening, I could hear the thunder of his horse's hoofs breaking the rhythm of my own. It sounded an enormous horse. I turned in the saddle and, for as long as I dared, I looked behind, but the pass was cold and empty behind me. As I turned to watch

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Jehan again the other hoofbeats seemed to move up alongside.

I was forcing Sara's Kabuli as hard as the beast could go, but over and above it all I could hear the whistling breath of an unseen animal and the steady creak of its saddle leathers before it went ahead and was gone, and my own mount was switching sideways so that I was taken by surprise and nearly went forward over its neck. I dragged the reins round and urged the horse on; and as I did so, I heard Jehan's mare scream.

The echoes that beat down from the sides of the pass sounded like the signal for the end of the world. I watched the mare swerve desperately, miss her footing, and then somersault, her rider beneath her.

Then I was reining in and running forward, my feet clattering on the stones as I reached for the inspector's gun.

"You won't need that," Jehan said.

He was quite conscious. The mare had rolled over him and regained her feet, and now stood with her neck bowed a few yards away. A little trickle of blood was running down Jehan's face from a cut near his eye, and in the moonlight his nose and mouth appeared to have turned grey.

I pulled back the hammer of the revolver.

But he said in English, "It's all right, Peter, you can put that thing away. I've broken my back. Already I can't feel my legs." He paused and then, "Have you a cigarette?"

"Yes." I lit one for him and put it between his lips.

Then he said, "Did you hear the horse?"

I tried to evade the question but I couldn't, and had to say, "Yes," again.

"My damned animal shied at it." Jehan eased himself slightly more upright with his hands. "You know, I never believed that story about Nicholson."

I put the gun away, and said, "Do you really believe we heard his ghost?"

"Of course." Jehan grinned painfully. "He never did like Pathans."

The pass was silent except for the sighing of the night wind. The man on the ground shivered. I said, "Why didn't you stop me coming to Lahore in the first place?"

He replied, "I didn't know. Until it was too late."

What sort of summons *did* a man get, that made him leave his life's work and arrange to kill his best friend? I didn't know. I supposed I would never know.

He smiled up at me. "There will always be little king-makers in the hills."

I wondered if he was right. I started to say something else, but this time he didn't answer, his eyes were looking past me, and his face had grown still.

I knelt on the ground and saw that he was dead. He looked younger, dead. Very much the way he had at Sandhurst, where I'd known him first. If one could say I'd ever known him at all.

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I turned away abruptly and went back to my horse. I didn't want to stay with Jehan any more. I looked round the bare pass, and I knew that from now on it was just one more place. Bleak and unfriendly and full of rocks and stones.

I sat in the saddle wondering what it was that I'd lost. I realised that it wasn't only that Jehan was dead. It was that he was dead so completely. As dead as my father and my grandfather in their forgotten, whitewashed tombs somewhere on the Terai.

I tried to remember what it had been like in the Regiment, but that was dim and unreal, too, like a game in childhood that was remembered but gone for ever.

It was you I wanted. Not your ghost, Sara had said. There wouldn't be any room for ghosts in her country, I thought.

I gazed up at the crescent of the moon hung over the peaks to the north.

And nothing that had happened in the last hundred years seemed half as important as the fact that Sara Garrard was alive.

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★ ***MICHAEL GILBERT's new short novel appears complete in next month's Argosy on sale July 10.***

SOLUTIONS to OUT FOR A SAIL OUT on page 20

1. *Ptolemy XI of Egypt, who murdered his daughter and composed a dirge for her funeral.*
2. *Cleopatra. Pierre Loti.*
3. *Because it originally came from Tangiers.*
4. *Alexander Graham Bell, while studying the mechanism of speech, taught his dog to mumble, "How are you, grandmother?"*
5. *Of the Rhine, in prehistoric times, when Britain was attached to the continent of Europe.*
6. *None. In Cambridge they are called Courts.*
7. *a. Kipling; b. J. M. Barrie; c. W. S. Gilbert; d. Thomas Love Peacock; e. Margery Sharp.*
8. *A child is under 14, a young person between 14 and 17.*
9. *About ⅔ of a gallon.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Condiment.* 9, *Rumble.* 10, *Mesmerist.* 11, *Escape.* 12, *Peasantry.* 13, *Addict.* 17, *A la.* 19, *Amazons.* 20, *Partner.* 21, *Pit.* 23, *Temple.* 27, *Watermark.* 28, *Ground.* 29, *Philately.* 30, *Answer.* 31, *Mendacity.*

Down. 2, *Omelet.* 3, *Damask.* 4, *Marine.* 5, *Nostril.* 6, *Outsiders.* 7, *Abrasions.* 8, *Repertory.* 14, *D'Artagnan.* 15, *Farmhouse.* 16, *Bollinger.* 17, *Asp.* 18, *Apt.* 22, *Ivanhoe.* 24, *Sealed.* 25, *Emetic.* 26, *Armlet.*

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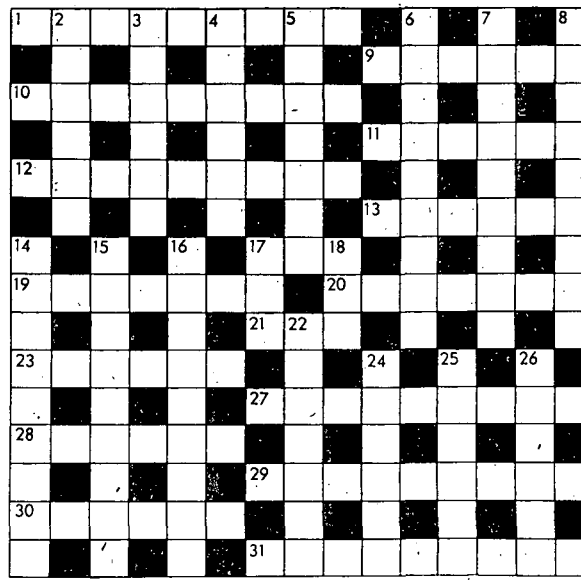
ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 143

★



CLUES

Across

1 The pep in pepper (9).

9 Dicky seat sounds noisy (6).

10 Svengali was one (9).

11 Flight east, south, to headland (6).

12 Any repast does for serfs (9).

13 Is he held in vice? (6).

17 French-style (1, 2).

19 Classic W.R.A.C.s (7).

20 Mr. Spenlow's was Mr. Jorkins (7).

21 Infernal card game (3).

23 Shrine for a high-brow? (6).

27 On paper sounds like invisible ink (9).

28 Reduced to earth? (6).

29 Stamp duty? No, pleasure (9).

30 Perhaps R. Lehmann found it not so dusty (6).

31 Rebuild town—or leave it lying (9).

Down

2 Egg-whisk—O let me! (6).

3 "Feed on her —— cheek," (Shakespeare) (6).

4 Tell that to him (6).

5 Does the Frenchman snort through it? (7).

6 At any odds, they're cads! (9).

7 Hurtful roan basis (9).

8 Acting nursery with conservative end (9).

14 The fourth musketeer (9).

15 Her famous? In an agricultural dwelling? (4-5).

16 The wine for a waiter (9).

17 Halt by this snake for paving (3).

18 Fitting in captive (3).

22 Russian with tool is novel (7).

24 Ocean-going? No, airtight (6).

25 E.g. the Roman feather (6).

26 Band sounds like small-arms (6).

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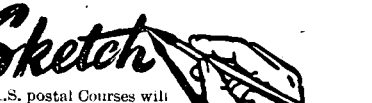

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